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MASKED MARK THE MOUNTED DETECTIVE BY

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CHAPTER I.

A BEAUTIFUL NEMESIS.

"COME on—straight on—direct to meet your doom, Masked Mark! May the foul fiend desert you just this once! May your ears be deaf to his warning for ten minutes longer! May you keep on without change until you run your black heart full against my lead—against the bullet that will avenge the noblest, brightest, truest of all your victims! Come on—come to your death! But die not until you can recognize my face and voice—until you know that it is the hand of a poor, weak woman that lays you low—until—"

The strained voice grows hoarser and more husky until it loses all coherence as its owner peers breathlessly out from the leafy ambush. Intense emotion is almost suffocating her. She shivers from crown to sole, and for a brief space her white teeth click rapidly together like one suffering from an ague chill, while a peculiar reddish mist seems to fall between her eyes and the horseman on the level beyond, enveloping him as in a bath of blood!

Until that instant she had felt so certain of success.

She knew her presence in the little clump of timber was wholly unsuspected by the being whose death she had sworn by all mankind holds holy. He was riding direct for the spot where she crouched—straight to his death!

["BEWARE, VICTOR VANDERLYN! YOUR RACE IS NEARLY RUN! YOUR HOUR OF DOOM IS NIGH!"]

But then he drew rein and turned half around in his saddle, shading both eyes with a curved palm as he gazed long and steadily over the prairie.

Her breath came hissing through her grating teeth as she drove that red mist from before her eyes. She raised the pistol her small hand clinched so tightly, and brought the double sights in line with the horseman as though about to risk a shot from that long distance. Her white-tipped finger curved half around the plated trigger; but there she paused.

"Too far!" she muttered, with a deep breath that was almost a groan. "If it was only a rifle, it might be done, but not with a pistol like this! The foul fiend still favors his own! Will the time never come? It shall—and this day!" she fiercely breathed, lifting one tightly clinched hand toward the calm, blue sky, her black eyes glowing as though filled with liquid fire.

A wide expanse of almost level plain, covered with a fair growth of grass and studded here and there with clumps of stunted trees and undergrowth. The land just undulating enough to break the monotony of a dead level.

Far away to the northwest lay a range of hills, broken and irregular in outline, showing almost black with their covering of evergreens. With this exception, the prairie tract might have been one of the many similar lying hundreds of miles to the south, instead of lying far up toward the line dividing Montana from the Northwest Territory.

In the little timber *motte* was concealed a horse and its fair young mistress, the one contentedly cropping the tender leaves surrounding it, the other bent on avenging a crime that had driven her well-nigh crazy with grief and despair.

A few minutes earlier in the day, Adola Fee was riding quietly along over the prairie, her head bent, her face pale and sad, her large dark eyes filling with tears as she recalled the past—as she remembered how often she had taken that same course in company with the man to whose keeping she had surrendered her heart.

It was a ride which she had taken very frequently, of late, and always alone. So familiar with the route had her gallant horse become in those days of sorrow, that he picked his way without touch of bridle or word of command. Soberly he advanced, heading for the little *motte* where he came to a halt of his own accord.

And as Adola Fee gazed around her, the tears came freely from her eyes, the bitter sobs filled her throat until she nearly choked.

It was the course they had taken that bright spring day, when all was joyous and blissful. It was by this *motte* that they had drawn rein, Oren Bohee and his love. And there, under the friendly shelter of that curved-top tree, the gallant young ranchero had broken the painfully sweet silence—had whispered the words so precious to her wildly throbbing heart—had bared his heart and laid it at her feet!

And she! Ah! it was like a glimpse of paradise, then! But only a glimpse—only the one brief glimpse; then came Tartarus instead!

Almost before the betrothed lovers could realize their wondrous bliss, Oren Bohee was foully murdered under cover of a stormy night, and when the awful deed was discovered, there remained naught to certainly indicate the vile assassin.

Little wonder that Adola Fee sunk beneath that terrible blow, to slowly rally and regain her former strength; but never her old gayety and lightness of heart. She was changed in looks as well as in spirit. She was pale as a corpse, though still beautiful as an artist's dream. The olden smiles never came into her face now, nor the merry laughter into the glorious dark eyes; yet the first was not always like a snow mask, nor the others lacking in fire on occasion.

Let the name of Oren Bohee be mentioned within her hearing, or the question of capturing his assassin be broached before her, and those about her knew that Adola Fee still had an object to live for.

It was one of these complete and startling changes that came over the maiden as she sat on her horse beneath the bent-topped tree on the edge of the timber island, that bright day.

Her wandering glance was arrested by a moving object on the prairie beyond, and she instinctively reined her horse back to the deeper shadow, not caring to be interrupted there by one whose tenderest sympathy would be unwelcome.

This was her first impulse, though it was as short-lived as it was purely mechanical. Her breath came in a quick gasp, her white teeth clicked sharply together, and vivid red spots glowed upon her pale cheeks as a wild, almost insane light leaped into her black eyes.

Though nearly half a mile distant when she first observed the horseman, Adola Fee recognized the steed and rider, and felt that before her was the vile assassin of her betrothed!

A dashing, graceful, manly figure he seemed, even at that distance, and though he was riding slowly, his blood-bay steed seemingly choosing its own gait and course.

But Adola Fee saw only the slayer of her lover,

and feeling that a pitying heaven had at length listened to her wild prayers, sending this demon in human shape as a sacrifice to her vengeance, she slipped from her saddle and led her horse into the timber island where his form would be hidden from the keen eyes of the wretch beyond. And then, with revolver ready for instant use, the maiden crouched there in ambush, her eyes glowing, her heart wildly leaping, her veins filled with fire as she waited for the careless rider to come within her reach.

For a brief space it seemed as though the fates had decreed the sacrifice. Straight for the little timber island, direct for the point where Adola Fee stood ready to send a bullet through his heart, rode the man whom she had termed Masked Mark. Two minutes longer, even at that leisurely gait, and his manly figure would be beneath that deadly weapon, and only a miracle could save his life. For, woman though she was, intense as her passion, and suffocating her emotions, the beautiful Nemesis held the pearl-hafted weapon with a hand as firm and steady as that of fate itself.

But then Masked Mark drew rein, just without pistol-shot, gazing steadily across the plain at something hidden from the view of the ambushed maiden. If he should turn in that direction! If he should veer aside, and come no nearer to the timber island!

With a hissing breath that was almost a curse Adola Fee witnessed this unexpected action, and for a brief space her heart turned sick within her bosom. She lived only for vengeance. For many weary days she had sought just such a meeting as this had promised to be; and now to have her hopes dashed to the ground just as success seemed certain! It was bitter, indeed!

She saw Masked Mark tighten the loose-lying reins and turn the head of his horse in the direction of his steady gaze, though his armed heels did not give the signal to advance, as yet. And seeing this, Adola Fee breathed that bitter vow.

"If the dog will not come to me, I'll go to him!" she muttered, as she moved cautiously toward her horse, keeping her glowing gaze riveted upon the horseman in the open. "Another chance may never offer. I must make the most of this!"

She gained her horse, but made no effort to mount it just then, for she saw that Masked Mark was once more in motion—was coming nearer, though not as before, heading directly toward the *motte* as though seeking its cover. Still his course, if maintained a minute longer, would bring him within short revolver range; and once more the beautiful Nemesis stood like an avenging statue, her gleaming weapon leveled, covering the horseman and following his leisurely motion.

Was it caprice, or a cruel fate?

Masked Mark veered abruptly to the left, riding along in a course parallel to the timber island, his steed slightly quickening its pace as it passed before the hidden avenger.

A moment of doubt and hesitation—then Adola Fee pressed trigger, feeling that a pitying Heaven must guide her lead true to its mark, though she knew that the range was rather long for her light-calibered weapon.

Eagerly she peered through the light smoke-wreath, and a choking cry of disappointed vengeance broke hissing through her grating teeth as she saw her intended victim still erect in his saddle.

The blood-bay snorted sharply at the vicious report, and tossing its head, made a mighty leap forward preparatory to stretching out in speedy flight; but Masked Mark was not even shaken in his seat, and showed no signs of being hit as he glanced toward the *motte*, where he could hardly miss detecting the fleecy curl of powder-smoke rising above the green.

He saw still more—caught a glimpse of a human figure leaping upon a horse, and touching the glossy red ribs and slackening the taut reins, Masked Mark dashed swiftly away over the prairie, just as Adola Fee darted from ambush into the bright sunlight, her long black hair floating free over her shoulders, her right hand grasping the pearl butt of a pistol whose muzzle strove to keep him covered.

"Halt! murderer! Masked Mark—devil—craven heart!"

A cry of astonishment broke from the lips of the horseman as he heard these fierce words and recognized the speaker as a woman. Mechanically he wrenched his good horse up, until the quivering haunches and floating tail were half hidden in the rank grass. He turned half around in his saddle, his eyes flashing with strong emotion. But not a line or curve of his face changed expression.

A wild, shrill cry came from the lips of the half-insane maiden as she dashed on at headlong speed, and again her nervous finger pressed the trigger.

Masked Mark suddenly jerked his head to one side, as though the whistle of the grooved lead came uncomfortably close to his ears, and the blood-bay dashed away at headlong speed, the rays of the noonday sun glinting from its sweat-wet sides.

"Coward!" came fiercely from the lips of the maiden as she urged her good horse on with hand and spur in hot pursuit. "Stop, Masked Mark,

and meet your fate like the man whose semblance you wear! Stop! it is a woman who calls! The woman whose heart you broke when you murdered her betrothed!"

Again the gloved hand tightened its grasp on the reins, and once more that strangely immobile face turned toward the beautiful Nemesis; but another spurt of smoke shot from the muzzle of her pistol, and once more the wicked hum of the whirling lead warned him of his peril. He tossed his head with a half-defiant air, and again marked the ribs of his good horse with the keen-armed heel. And as the blood-bay stretched out at racing speed, its rider critically watched the rider behind him, mentally comparing the black with his own steed.

It did not take many moments to convince him of the truth. The black, fresh and unjaded, was gaining upon the bay, though he knew the latter was doing its best. Had he covered two-score less miles that day, the result might have been different; as it was—

Masked Mark shrugged his shoulders slightly as one hand sought his belt and touched the butt of a revolver. One shot, and the danger would be of the past, so far as this pursuer was concerned. Would he fire that shot?

Twice more Adola Fee discharged her weapon, greeting each miss with a sharp cry of angry rage and chagrin; then, as though convinced that escape by flight was among the impossibilities, Masked Mark abruptly drew rein and wheeled his horse to face the beautiful Nemesis.

"At last, craven-hearted assassin!" Adola cried, as her good horse shot nearer, and she covered the man with her pistol. "At last Heaven has heard my prayers, and vengeance is mine! Hands up, or die like a cur!"

"At your service, Miss Fee!" promptly, almost mockingly responded the man, suiting the action to the words. "Had I recognized you earlier, the chase would have been shorter. As it is, pray accept my humble apologies for—"

"Silence, you mocking hound!" cried Adola, fairly beside herself as she wrenched up her horse, her revolver muzzle almost touching that strangely immobile face. "Save your breath for uttering a prayer, if your lips know how to shape the words, for your time has come to die!"

"You wouldn't shoot a defenseless man, would you, Miss Fee?" he uttered, his voice smooth and even, but with a peculiar twang that cannot be readily described. "That would smack disagreeably of murder, wouldn't it, now?"

A strained, almost harsh cry escaped her lips, and her black eyes glowed redly with fierce passion as she cried:

"Murder! you can utter that word, and still look me in the face? You, whose hands are dyed red with the blood of the man whom you assassinated without giving a chance to defend himself! You—Masked Mark, the murderer of Oren Bohee?"

Despite her fierceness, despite her passion-convinced features, Adola Fee looked very beautiful just then as she leaned forward in the saddle, holding her spirited steed in check with one hand, while the other thrust a cocked revolver into the face of the man with the immobile features.

A perfect brunette in complexion and hair, the latter, set free from its fastenings by catching on a limb as she leaped so hastily into the saddle to set out in chase of Masked Mark, now hanging to her waist in sable profusion, framing her face with a border of jet. Her large eyes, filled with a passion that imparted to them a slight reddish tinge. Her face, white as ivory save for the twin spots of vivid red that marked each cheek. Her rich red lips, slightly parting and showing twin rows of pearly teeth. Her form, a little above the average of her sex, queenly in carriage as it was in height, and perfect in its every curve and line, its superb proportions admirably set off by the snugly-fitting riding-habit.

Such was Adola Fee, in outward semblance.

Masked Mark sat his horse easily, his hands elevated over his head, yet there was nothing ungraceful about his attitude, even then.

He was about the medium height of mankind, his shoulders square, his chest full, his waist round and compact, his limbs muscular and well-shaped. His hair was long and curling at the ends, of a rich nut-brown. His beard, worn full, was of the same hue, thick and silken.

He wore a pearl-gray felt hat on his head; a gray woolen shirt, open at the throat, affording a glimpse of a fine wool-knit shirt beneath; overalls of heavy brown ducking; boots of moderately fine leather and neat workmanship, reaching a little above the knees in front, curved behind, for easy walking. Around his waist was a broad belt full of cartridges. This also served to support a knife and a brace of heavy revolvers, while a repeating Winchester was slung at his saddle-bow.

But there was one peculiarity which had helped to give him the title he bore—Masked Mark. Though at a casual glance, one would hardly have detected the fact, he wore a mask which covered his entire face, save his eyes, they shining out of cunningly-contrived holes that could only be told as artificial on close examination.

The same careful inspection would show that

his silken beard, if not the magnificent *chevelure*, was woven thread by thread, into a material which formed the mask itself. It was truly a cunning work of art!

"You think I killed Oren Bohee?" he slowly uttered.

"Dare you deny it, wretch?" cried Adola, her eyes flaming. "Stop! evil as you are, I would not send you to your foul master with a lie upon your lips!"

A short, hard laugh came through the cunningly-masked lips, but his voice was soft, almost sad as he replied:

"Death would not be very bitter, coming from your fair hand, Adola, but—"

His speech was cut short by a light stroke from the revolver-muzzle across his lips, and then Adola pressed the weapon full against his temple as she cried:

"How dare you utter my name, dog—murderer! And his blood still red upon your hands! It is too much! I would have given you time to breathe a prayer—but now—*die*, with all your sins upon your head!"

And the pointed hammer fell upon the cartridge.

CHAPTER II.

GALLANT KNIGHT, AND A SPIRITED DAMSEL.

To the northwest of the timber-studded prairie, where the ground grew broken and wilder-looking, and where thick-lying rocks and boulders took the place of green grass and bright-hued flowers, another horseman was riding leisurely along, at almost the same hour of the same day on which Masked Mark was waylaid by the beautiful Nemesis. This cavalier, too, was young, graceful, sitting his horse as though born to the saddle. Like Masked Mark, he was of ordinary height and build; but there all semblance between the two men ceased.

However commonplace his appearance might have been in an older and more thickly settled country, the horseman looked strangely out of place in that wild region, with his snowy linen, his kid-gloved hands, and his garments of fine texture and fashionable cut. And strangest of all seemed the glossy silk hat which rested upon his well-poised head!

Not strange where the garments were made, nor where they were primarily worn, but out here on the very verge of civilization, where nineteen-twentieths of the inhabitants were of the "wild and woolly" order, to whom the laws of fashion were decidedly a dead letter, one would hardly expect to encounter such a neat, almost elegant "get up."

It is hardly necessary to state that Alva Bohee had but recently come to the Rackabout Range, as that section of the northwest grazing land was popularly known; his garb testified as much, and was borne out by his clear, milk-and-rose complexion, on which the tanning sun had made no impression, as yet. Yet, if his own equipment was wholly unsuited to the region and the life which the stockmen of Rackabout Range led, he showed better judgment so far as his horse was concerned.

A clean-limbed, deep-chested iron-gray, it bore the high-horned, deep-seated saddle so popular with western riders, of elaborately stamped and ornamented leather, with huge wooden stirrups and broad horse-hair "cinch" for a girth. At the saddle-bow hung a neatly coiled lasso of plaited rawhide, oiled until it was flexible as silk and strong as woven steel wires. To the stirrup-leathers were attached broad leathers to protect the rider's legs from coming in contact with the sides of his steed.

Even stranger than his elaborate costume in that wild and not particularly law-abiding region, was the fact that the young man bore neither knife, pistol nor rifle, at least visible to a casual glance. That fact alone would have stamped him as an alien to Rackabout Range.

Alva Bohee was a graceful and free rider, whatever else might be brought against him, and he rapidly made his way through the thick-lying boulders, his figure easily swaying in time to the movements of his horse, until he abruptly drew rein when only a few rods away from the river which cut its way through the broken range, lying so deep down in its rocky bed that not yet could he catch a glimpse of its foam-speckled bosom.

He could hear the faint murmuring of the waters as they sped along amid the mossy rocks, but clearer and sweeter far than this there came the sounds of a fresh young voice to his eagerly listening ears.

"Jessie, my bonny brown thrush!" he muttered, his blue eyes lighting up with a rarely-seen fire as a smile curved his lips.

Slackening his rein he moved toward the river-bank, here high and precipitous, pausing again when his eager gaze discovered the author of that wild, free song.

Down in the middle of the river, where the waters foamed and swirled around the green rocks that vainly sought to bar its passage, rode a light canoe of Indian manufacture, trim and elegant in shape, quaintly ornamented with stained quills and hard-pressed grasses. And in that canoe, kneeling in its center, her half-

bare arms plying the double-ended paddle with graceful skill and power, was the girl whom Alva Bohee had called his "brown thrush."

Her head was bare, her straw hat lying in the stern of the canoe, and as the sun shone fairly upon her crown, it was reflected back with a golden-red gleam by the curling locks of hair. Red—undeniably red, but lovely hair for all that, thick, glossy, twining and curling in graceful abandon, tiny rings drooping over the broad, white brow, to be tossed back as the spirited damsel flung up her head with a gay laugh, only to fall again as though loving the clear, moist skin it caressed.

Her dress was of common print, the figure large and gay, fitting her healthy young form but poorly; yet as he gazed down upon Jessie Roberts, Alva Bohee thought that never before had he beheld one half so lovely, half so lovable!

Clear and musical as the notes of the bird to which he had likened her, rose the voice of the maiden above the roaring of the swift waters. He could not translate her words, though he could hear them plainly enough. She was singing a wild, weird Indian chant as she fought with the waters, sending her frail-looking canoe here and there amid the sharp crested rocks, laughing gayly as the whirling waters broke against the sharp prow and cast their spray into her face.

Just as the wild thrush will sing to itself in the lonely forest, where not even its mate is near to listen and admire, so Jessie Roberts sung and played with the wild waters. She was not trying to cross the river. She would pull up the swift, eddying current, passing through the most dangerous channels, only to whirl the light canoe about and shoot down through them again, running the risk of splitting the frail craft on their sharp points, simply for the wild excitement the act afforded her.

But then—as she tossed back her head to free her eyes from the drooping curls—she caught sight of the horseman on the high bank, and her voice abruptly died away. Even at that distance Alva Bohee caught the red flush, half-shame, half-mischief, which overspread her countenance.

He lifted his hat, smiling brightly, but then a cry of alarm escaped his paling lips.

He saw the water strike the canoe as the dexterous paddle paused in that moment of surprise, whirling it half-way around, threatening to dash it against a ragged rock over the top of which the foam was rolling. He saw the girl make a swift, hard stroke—then saw the paddle snap in her hands and both ends drop into the water, swiftly whirling beyond her reach!

"Jessie! my precious!" he gasped, hoarsely, clearing his feet from the cumbrous stirrups as though bent on leaping to her assistance, though such a rash action could only end in his death, without aiding her in the least.

But before he could clear the saddle, he saw the canoe slip past the rock, darting lightly down the river, avoiding the sharp rocks as by a miracle. And he saw one brown hand waved toward him—saw that piquant face turned upward with a smile as though of encouragement!

"Fear not!" he cried, urging his horse along the bank at breakneck speed. "Stick to the boat, and I'll save you yet!"

"Fresh" though he was, Alva Bohee was prompt to conceive and quick to execute in this emergency, when the life of one whom he had learned to love better far than his own life, was threatened. He knew that he could not possibly descend the high, straight bank in time to lend the imperiled girl aid, anywhere near the spot where the accident happened, and turning his horse's head sharply away from the river as he uttered that encouraging shout, he sped swiftly across the wide neck of land, to strike the river again lower down, yet still at a safe distance above the falls, the roaring of which grew momentarily louder and more sullen as he rushed on.

The good horse made short work of the half-mile, rough though the course was, as he reached a point where he was able to scramble down to the water's edge without tumbling, Alva Bohee tore the lasso from the saddle-bow and kicked off his boots, tossing his coat and hat behind him as he scrambled down the rough steep.

Though reason would have told him that he had an abundance of time, his actions were hurried and agitated.

He glanced anxiously up the river, but as yet the canoe had not rounded the turn to enter into the straight stretch which led to the falls, only a few rods below his present position. His eyes turned in that direction, though he knew all that his eyes could tell him, without that look.

He could see the waters as they dipped to take a leap of a dozen yards before being dashed to foam and spray on the ragged rocks that lay at the foot of the falls. He saw that here and there the dark crest of a rock broke the otherwise smooth curve of waters, now plainly revealed as the gentle breeze lifted the misty spray, now growing dim and phantom-like as the fleecy veil settled over their grim heads again.

Before him, the current was broken by several rocks, some lying high and dry above the element, others covered with a thin sheet of the

liquid, yet showing clearly enough for their shape to be recognized.

For a moment or two he hesitated, coiling the pliable lasso in his hands as though preparing it for a cast on which life might depend; but then he muttered, huskily:

"I dare not risk it! I dare not trust my skill, with her life depending upon a single cast! To miss—it would be her death—worse than a thousand deaths to me!"

He knotted one end of the rawhide rope around the trunk of a stunted cedar tree, then uncoiled the lasso as he ran up the water's edge as far as its length would permit. Then, just as he caught a glimpse of the canoe and its occupant, coming around the bend, nearly a half a mile above him, he plunged into the cold water and swam vigorously up and outward, fighting the rapid current with strong arms and skillful.

Few men could have done as well, but even he was swept rapidly down by the powerful current, and it was only after a terrible struggle that he succeeded in gaining the broad, flat rock on which he had placed his hopes of rescuing Jessie. Panting, he rose from the water, glancing up-stream, drawing in the slack of the lasso until its light weight rose clear of the tugging waters. There was not much to spare, but Alva Bohee believed it would answer, since he had crossed the worst of the current, where it ran the swiftest, and where the canoe would naturally drift unguided.

He hoped it would come within reach of his grasp as he stood on the flat rock, but if not—if it should be carried between him and the shore, on that side, Jessie could catch on the lasso, and thus check the boat in its downward course.

He waved his free hand toward her, and cried loudly, to overpower the roar of the falling waters:

"Fear not, Jessie! I will save you, or die!"

There came an answering cry, though he could not distinguish the words she uttered, but he saw her wave one hand, then bend low in the canoe, both hands buried in the water. She was guiding the canoe, head on, as coolly as though it floated on the bosom of a placid pond. And as the frail craft came nearer to his position, a slight flush shot into the face of the young man as his eager gaze rested upon hers; for, through the curling tangle of red hair, he saw a roguish smile!

The rapid current did not give him time to solve the enigma, and as the canoe came shooting swiftly toward him, he eagerly bent over the edge of the rock with outstretched arm and grasped the boat, checking its progress and causing its stern to swing rapidly around until its side touched the rock on which he knelt.

"Quick! step out, little one!" he panted, his voice strained and husky with emotion. "Thank God! you are safe!"

A sharp cry broke from her lips, and then merged into a half-vexed laugh as she exclaimed:

"Well, now you have done it, haven't you?"

In his eagerness to secure her safety, Alva Bohee lost his head for a moment, and fearing she might slip from the dampened edge of the rock as she sprang lightly from the canoe, he caught at her arm, raising erect and pressing her to his bosom in a close embrace.

That alone might not have called forth that half-pettish ejaculation, but in order to secure her safety, Alva released the canoe and it was whirled swiftly away by the current, to be carried over the falls in a few moments. And still worse; he let the lasso slip through his fingers, recalling its importance only as he saw the blackened end slipping rapidly into the water, like a frightened snake.

"I forgot—I had thoughts only for you, Jessie," he muttered, as she deftly drew out of his embrace.

He smiled ruefully as he glanced toward the shore, and wondered how they were to leave that rock, now that both lasso and canoe were gone. For himself, he might make it by swimming, though he knew it would be hard work now that he was so much nearer the falls; but she? Of course that would be impossible for her.

"My poor canoe!" murmured the girl, with a rueful glance over the falls. "If I had only thought that—"

"I am sorry, Miss Roberts," interposed Alva, his fair face flushing hotly. "I lost my nerve at the thoughts of your peril, else the canoe wouldn't have twisted out of my hand. I had thoughts only for you—only of saving you from death."

He paused abruptly, flushing more vividly than before, as the girl broke into a merry laugh, those dark blue eyes gazing roguishly, yet half-wonderingly into his.

"My danger? I in peril, Mr. Bohee? Well, that is good!"

The young man bit his lip until the blood came, feeling strangely abashed before that merry laugh, feeling curiously awkward as those frank eyes rested upon him. Yet she was but a poor, uneducated, ill-dressed border girl, while he—

"If you had gone over the falls with the canoe—"

"Of course I wouldn't—why should either of us go over the falls?"

"One has—the canoe!"

"Because of your—because you forgot to hold on to it, I mean," and the frank eyes sunk a little beneath his ardent gaze. "Only for that—"

"I was thinking of you, Jessie," and as his voice deepened and grew graver, Alva took her brown little hand in his for a moment; then it slipped from his warm grasp, he hardly knew how. "Your peril unnerved me, but thank Heaven you are safe!"

With a quick gesture she pushed the dampened curls back from her face with both hands, looking up into his face with her head a trifle on one side, a curious little smile just beginning to show itself about her red-ripe lips.

"You are in earnest, then?" she said, slowly.

"You really thought I was in danger?"

Alva Bohee gazed at her in speechless amazement. In danger? Alone in a frail canoe, without oar or paddle, at the mercy of the swift current, doomed to meet a cruel death on the ragged rocks at the foot of the falls, if she escaped from the sharp rocks in the channel while being swept helplessly down the river. In danger!

Like a rapidly moving panorama he saw it all passing before his eyes, and with an earnestness that she could no longer affect to misinterpret, he uttered:

"Jessie, Heaven has preserved you thus far, and I'll do the rest! I'll save you, or die in the attempt!"

She saw how intensely in earnest he was, now, and the half-mocking smile faded from her red lips, while a softer light came into her big blue eyes. They dropped before his gaze as she murmured:

"You mean it, and I thank you, heartily, but—"

"You are not afraid to speak out, Jessie?" he whispered, as she hesitated, with a shy glance upward.

"You won't be angry, or think me too awfully wicked?"

There was something in her voice—something like a smothered laugh—that sent a disagreeable cold thrill running along the young man's spinal column, but he replied:

"Angry? At you, Jessie?"

"I didn't know—folks say you are so awfully particular," and the laugh bubbled over in good earnest, now. "I know I'd ought to be ashamed of myself, and so I am—only—"

Alva Bohee drew himself stiffly erect, muttering:

"Really, Miss Roberts, you must do the laughing for both of us, for I can't see what there is so amusing in the case."

Instantly the little mountain witch grew sober again, though there was the ghost of a laugh still lingering in her merry blue eyes.

"I said it was shameful, in me, and now I know it! I didn't stop to think, at the time, or maybe I'd have behaved better. Now—you'll always think of me as a wild, silly child who—"

"Jessie," and his hand gently forced her eyes to meet his by lifting her chin. "Do you really wish to know how I think of you? Shall I tell you?"

The flush deepened a little on the sun-browned cheeks, but then the little witch drew back her head from his gentle touch, and Alva Bohee bit his lip again as he saw that mischievous smile return.

"As you saw me when my paddle broke? I read your thoughts in your face, Mr. Bohee! You believed the wild girl was doomed to escape the rope, by taking too much water?"

"I saw and realized your peril, and resolved to rescue you, or share your fate, Jessie!"

"I knew it!" and the merry laugh fairly awoke the echoes again, even over the roar of the waterfall. "Yet I was in no danger—I could have swum ashore and taken my canoe with me, at any minute after the paddle broke, until you caught me here—and let my poor boat go to destruction."

"Jessie!"

"Awful, wasn't I?" with a shy glance into his face. "But I am telling you true, Mr. Bohee. I was just as safe as you were, all the time. Safer, since you swam out here, so much nearer the falls."

"Then why—Jessie, you are not jesting at my expense?"

"It is truth, every word. You are not angry with me?"

"Not angry—but puzzled! Jessie, why did you add to your risks, then, by floating so far through the rocks?"

"Because—because I wanted to give you a chance," the girl murmured, with a nervous movement of her little brown hands. "I knew you thought my life was in great danger. I heard you cry out encouragingly, and when I saw you dash off, I knew what you were thinking of. I knew you would be ready to keep me from going over the falls, and so—well—"

Her voice faltered and her face grew very rosy again as she felt that ardent gaze which the young man maintained, his eyes brightening as she hastily explained her motives. Alva Bohee made a motion as though he would draw her closer to him, but withheld his hands as he

saw her shrink slightly away. He would not frighten the shy brown thrush again.

Yet, with his exultation, there was a trace of embarrassment, and this showed itself as he spoke:

"I was waiting for you, Jessie; but I've made a pretty botch of it, haven't I?"

"It shows that they slandered you, anyhow! They said you were a bookworm—only the shadow of a man, without grit or backbone! They said that you were a white-faced coward, who would run from the least danger as though it meant certain death. I knew they were lying—and I told them so, too!" impulsively cried the maiden, her cheeks glowing, her blue eyes meeting his openly in her warmth.

Alva Bohee smiled a little, though at the same time there came a harder light into his mild blue eyes, and there was a peculiar cadence to his voice as he inquired:

"They said so, Jessie? Pray have 'they' any more definite name? That is, if you are at liberty to tell me," he added.

"One of the vilest-mouthed was Demas Fee."

"The brother to Miss Adola, my brother's betrothed?" he asked, his voice growing harder than before.

Jessie nodded, her face growing graver in keeping with his.

"He is one of the worst, and seems to hold a bitter grudge against you, for some reason. It was only the day before yesterday that he was here, and kept picking at you until I got angry and gave him as good as he sent."

"You spoke up for me, Jessie? That was very kind."

Not much in the words, but coming with that look, they made the little red-crowned head drop a trifle, though her voice was brave and frank enough as she added:

"Why not? I knew he was speaking falsely when he said you were a coward. I told him that the day would come when he would have to eat his words—that you were as high above him as heaven is above earth!"

"Jessie, my true-heart!" cried Alva, unable to longer restrain himself, catching her to his breast and kissing her once and again, before she could divine his purpose.

Then, she uttered a sharp, panting cry, and her hand struck him sharply in the face as she slipped away from his embrace and sprang from the flat rock out into the water.

CHAPTER III.

MASKED MARK JUMPS THE GAME.

ADOLA FEE was terribly in earnest as she thrust the muzzle of her revolver against the mask worn by the strange being whom she had brought to bay, and it seemed as though the race of Masked Mark was forever ended as the pointed hammer fell upon the metallic cartridge.

Yet he made not the slightest attempt to check the shot or foil her desperate purpose, his dark eyes gazing steadily, one might say sadly, at her through the cunningly contrived apertures in the mask he wore. It was almost as though he courted death, rather than sought to avert it; and even as her finger contracted upon the trigger, the avenger felt a little thrill of wonder, not entirely free from superstition.

The pointed hammer fell—but only a dull snap followed instead of the death-dealing report.

A sharp, angry cry parted the lips of the maddened woman, and swiftly the doubly-acting hammer rose and fell for the second time—to again fail its mistress.

A hard, metallic laugh broke from Masked Mark at this repeated failure, and with a swift motion he caught the hand of the beautiful Nemesis and twisted the revolver from her frenzied grasp. With a rapid, practiced hand, he touched the spring which held the barrel locked, and pressing the plated tube downward, its neat mechanism threw out the empty shells. Not a loaded cartridge remained in the chambers, and Adola Fee grated her teeth in silent anger as she saw the secret of that strange indifference to death.

Masked Mark laughed again, his tones softer, more musical, though there was a faint trace of pitying contempt in his words as he answered her silent speech.

"You are shooting a little closer to the mark now than at first, Miss Fee. Though you seem to include me among the demons who are permitted to roam this earth, I am but a man of common flesh and blood, after all. And in saying that, I confess my disinclination to die, even by so fair a hand as—"

"Devil! assassin!" panted Adola, pale as a corpse, her brain whirling until she was forced to clasp her temples tightly with both hands in the vain effort to control its wild throbbings.

Masked Mark made an involuntary motion, as though he would lean forward and lend her gentle support; but only for an instant. He drew back, with a slight shrug of his shapely shoulders, a strange light filling his dark eyes.

"Hard words, Miss Fee; but luckily they can break no bones, and the time will come when you will freely offer to retract them, if not apologize for having given them birth."

She did not appear to hear or understand his

words, still clasping her temples, a wild, half-crazed fire filling her eyes.

Masked Mark watched her in silence for a few moments, then uttered a cold, clear laugh. Was it an experiment? If so, it worked to perfection, for the quivering hands dropped from the face, and Adola Fee confronted him with more of reason in her eyes. And as though resolved to make the cure complete, Masked Mark spoke in cold, hard tones:

"You poor, silly child!—to think of pitting yourself against Masked Mark, and fancy even for a moment that you could come out better than second best! You, a poor, crack-brained girl, with reason unsettled by morbid brooding over a red mystery—I, the man whom two-score of the sharpest denizens of Rackabout Range have vainly striven to capture or to slay!"

"I will succeed even yet! I will kill you, even as you killed him!" panted Adola, his tones stinging her even more keenly than his words.

Masked Mark laughed again, his tones softer, but still containing that irritating tinge of pitying contempt.

"Not until you learn to display better judgment, my poor child—not until you can keep your head level enough to count your shots and never pull trigger twice on the same shell."

"You knew it—you knew I was helpless!" panted the young woman. "Else you never would have faced me with such seeming boldness—you craven-heart!"

"Of course I knew it," coolly retorted Masked Mark, as he snapped the polished barrel back in its place over the empty cylinder. "Even if I had not known the sort of gun you carried, I could have told you the make and caliber of your tool the instant I heard it speak its first word, so familiar is the language to my ear. A pretty tool, and dangerous enough in the right hands, when not called upon to do too much," he added, turning the beautiful weapon over in his hand—a Smith & Wesson, .32 caliber, 5 shot and double-action. "But when its pretty song was ended, and I saw you make no motion to replace it with another gun, I knew you were off your base too far to be dangerous, and so—"

"Turned upon me, to laugh and jeer at a broken-hearted woman!" Adola passionately interposed, her superb figure quivering with strong emotions. "Laugh now, you red-handed villain, while you may, for the time will come when the right must triumph—when you must pay the penalty of your dastardly sins! And poor, silly fool though you term me, it shall come about through my means—I have sworn it by high Heaven! I repeat the oath now—to never know rest or idleness while your blood-stained hand is warm with life! To never falter until you have paid the penalty of your foul crime with your neck! To keep on your track until I bring you to the scaffold!"

Masked Mark sat his horse silently while Adola passionately uttered these threats, his eyes growing grave, his whole demeanor changing from careless insolence to deep respect, if not of reverence. And when her voice ceased, choking with her powerful emotions, he spoke, his tones grave, even sad:

"Miss Fee, I ask your pardon for my rude words. They were harder for me to utter than for me to hear, but I saw that in no other way could I as certainly bring you back to your ordinary state of mind. I feared your brain was giving way."

He ceased speaking, his head drooping perceptibly as a short, harsh laugh parted her lips.

"You—the vile assassin! You—pitying me—trying to keep my brain from giving way! Bah! a liar, as well as assassin!"

Masked Mark seemed to be stung sharply by her tones of bitter scorn and contempt, for he flung back his head and squared his shoulders, his voice ringing out clear and firm:

"I have never lied to you, Miss Fee; I never will, even to preserve my *incognito*, on which so much depends—so much of deep importance to your peace of mind."

"You have called me an assassin time and again, since you sent that first shot at my life. I passed it by, for I feared your great grief had turned your brain. Now, since you say you are as sane as ever—and I can see as much for myself—I ask you to speak still plainer. Whom do you accuse me of assassinating?"

"The man I loved—the one who was all the world to me! Oren Bohee, beside whom you are as the vilest imp from Hades in contrast with an angel from on high!" impetuously cried the young woman, her black eyes flashing, her white hands clinching tightly, as though longing to close about his throat.

"What proof have you, Miss Fee?" slowly asked the man.

"Dare you deny it?" she panted.

"I dare, and do deny it," Masked Mark suddenly cried, his dark eyes glowing vividly as he leaned forward and gazed direct into her blazing orbs. "Before high heaven I stand guiltless of bloodshed! There is no red stain upon my hands."

He ceased as abruptly as before, for that hard, hysterical laugh cut him short, stinging like the lash of a whip.

"You swear—and call upon high heaven to bear witness that your hands are stainless! How about your heart? your soul? your conscience? Are they clear and spotless? Bah! you prevaricating double-tongue!"

The half-crazed woman lifted her clinched hand and struck savagely at the masked face, but her wrist fell into the gloved hand, and was held firmly, though gently.

Masked Mark replied, his voice grave and reproving, yet strangely musical and with a tinge of sadness:

"You are determined to believe me guilty, even though you cannot bring the faintest shadow of proof against me, when it comes to the test. For this I would not care so much—since I long ago abandoned all thought for myself—but you are seriously impeding the wheels of justice by your mad, reasonless actions; you are making the work of those who, with more method if less cause than yourself, have sworn to see ample justice wrought against the criminal, doubly hard, if not entirely hopeless. Stop!" he added sternly, as Adola tried to twist her hand free from his strong, firm grip. "You must listen to me now."

"You loved Oren Bohee. You plighted your troth to him, and looked forward to a long life of happiness together."

"To have the blissful dream forever shattered by your cruel hands!" panted the maiden.

"Once more I tell you you are wrong; that I never lifted hand nor weapon against the life of your betrothed husband. If not as wildly, I mourned his untimely death as sincerely as even you, Miss Fee!"

"Liar! assassin!"

She struggled desperately to free herself, but found herself powerless against his strength. He waited until she grew quiet, worn out by the intensity of her hatred, even more than her struggles against his restraint, then he resumed:

"Even though you refuse to believe the truth when it comes from my lips, I must place myself square on the record with you, Miss Fee. The time will come when your eyes will be opened to the real facts, and then you will be glad that I need not shame you by telling my part of the story."

"Oren Bohee was foully murdered, and as yet his assassin goes unwhipped of justice; but he is marked, and the net is surely, if slowly, closing around him. His capture is almost assured, if no serious obstacle is cast in the path of justice by rash if well-meaning friends to the murdered man."

"Talk—all talk!" panted Adola, wearily.

"You may make it so, unless you learn to control your insane fancies!" sternly retorted the masked man. "By your wild and baseless suspicions, you have rendered my work doubly difficult. You have roused a strong sentiment against me in the minds of your friends and neighbors. You have sworn that by my hand Oren Bohee died, and—"

"Before Heaven I believe it!" she exclaimed, passionately.

"Before that same august tribunal I am willing to take oath your suspicions are wholly unfounded," was the swift retort. "Instead of being the murderer of your lover, I have sworn to know no rest until his death is fully avenged. And I will make that oath good if only you will keep your proper place as a modest, gentle woman who—"

"Has seen all her hopes in life blasted by your ruthless hand!" passionately cried the young woman. "Though you prate until the heavens fall, I will never believe you innocent—will never believe my instinct has misled me so widely—even could I discredit the evidence of my own ears!"

Masked Mark started sharply at her last words, and his breath was drawn in with a sharp effort, almost like a gasp, as he leaned closer to her and hurriedly uttered:

"Your own ears? What do you mean by that? What have you heard, Ad—Miss Fee?"

A hard, strained laugh parted her lips as she wrested her hand from his momentarily unnerved grasp. And harder still were her tones as she swiftly replied:

"That finds a break in your cunning armor, does it, Masked Mark—cowardly assassin who hides his evil face from the clear light of day! Ay! my own eyes can bear witness against you, when you so brazenly swear that your conscience is clear of all bloodshed!"

With a faint sigh Masked Mark rose erect in his saddle, his dark eyes fixed steadily upon the pale face of the woman whom no words could convince of his innocence.

"You are sincere, I know, Miss Fee," he said, slowly, as though carefully selecting his words before giving them utterance. "You believe me guilty, or you would not say so. You have heard something that convinces you I am the real murderer of Oren Bohee; but you will not tell me what it is?"

"When the proper time comes—when you are standing unarmed and unmasked before your judges—then I will tell you and all the world!" she cried, passionately.

Masked Mark bowed his head, one gloved hand mechanically fingering the polished butt of a

heavy revolver as it slightly protruded from its holster alongside the high saddle-bow.

He did not see the wild, insane light that leaped into the eyes of the young woman, else he might have kept a closer guard over her actions. He was lost in thought for a few moments, but then lifted his head and spoke rapidly:

"Keep your secrets, Miss Fee; I will not ask for your confidence again. I have taken up the trail, and I will follow it to the end, though that end may be my own grave."

"It is—and my hand opens it for you, assassin!" cried Adola, with mad triumph, as she leaned forward and tore one of the heavy revolvers from its resting-place on the saddle, then reined her horse back a pace as she cocked the weapon and covered the masked horseman with its muzzle.

"Now, murderer, beg for your life! If I cannot drag you to the gallows, at least I can avenge my poor Oren by taking your life in return for his!"

Masked Mark laughed, coldly, mockingly, as he uttered:

"With an empty gun, Miss Fee? Bah! why play the silly farce over for the third time?"

So natural were his words and tones—so utterly devoid of fear did he seem—that Adola was deceived, and lowered the pistol without testing its virtues, though the hammer was raised and ready to fall. And a mocking laugh mingled with her exclamation of dismay as Masked Mark spurred his horse forward, grasping the revolver and twisting the barrel upward.

It was quickly wrested from her grasp, but there was a sharp report and a bullet went high toward the blue sky. And with a sobbing moan Adola Fee listened to the reckless laugh and mocking words of the masked horseman:

"Never take the word of one whom you have declared your enemy, Miss Fee! Had you but touched the trigger a moment sooner, Masked Mark would have been a mystery no longer!"

"Devil—mocking fiend!" she gasped. "My turn will come sooner or later, and then—"

"It may come sooner than you think, pretty one," the man with the hidden face retorted, his voice hard and disagreeable, in startling contrast to the tones he had so recently used.

"If you do not take warning by my advice, and fall back to your proper sphere, leaving such desperate work to those who are better fitted by nature for it, your turn may come—and after a fashion far from agreeable."

"Once more, go back to your home and behave as a modest, sensible woman should. Banish your wild and baseless suspicions. Forget your wilder vows and dreams of vengeance. Leave all this to those who have taken up your cause with cool heads and steady hands. Do this, or it may be the worse for you in the end—for you and for those who are trying to bring the crime home to its author."

"When death claims me—not before!" flashed back the spirited maiden, her black eyes gleaming vividly. "You have disarmed me—I am powerless to arrest you, or to kill you as you killed him, my love! But I can do something. I can follow you as you flee, and keep you in sight until I find others more capable coping with your brute strength! I can—and I will!"

With a quick motion she backed her horse beyond his grasp, holding the reins firmly, ready to advance or retreat as necessity should require. Her eyes were glowing with a fire that told how thoroughly she was in earnest, and Masked Mark bit his hidden lip with a vigor that stained them with red blood, though he gave no outward sign of disturbance.

He knew that his horse was jaded by its long and fast running of that forenoon. He knew that the animal which Adola rode was one of great speed and much endurance, at any time the equal of his own steed, and now, being so much fresher, by far its superior.

From the black horse and its resolute mistress, his dark eyes roved swiftly over the prairie beyond; and a vivid light shot into them that told of some startling discovery.

Far away, yet so distinctly visible as to make it clear he was approaching their position, Masked Mark beheld a horseman. Only a very keen eye could have detected this object, it was so nearly in a line with one edge of the timber island out of which Adola Fee had spurred when her intended victim took to flight at her vain shot; but Masked Mark knew he was not mistaken. In five minutes the rider would be within hail, and he could scarcely prove other than an enemy to the masked horseman.

A short, hard laugh broke from his lips at the speech of the excited woman, and he cast her gleaming revolver to the ground, a score yards away, saying:

"A gallant knight could have no more lovely follower, and be sure I shall not object to your devotion, fair lady! Follow if you will, but I warn you the route will prove long and hard for one so tenderly reared!"

Adola reined her horse backward toward the spot where the revolver fell in the grass, a renewed hope springing up in her bosom. If she could secure it—she had cartridges with her! Once armed, Masked Mark should surrender or die!

She distrusted him still, and was warily on her guard against any trickery, though Masked Mark sat his horse without any attempt to follow her, nor did he make a motion as she paused beside the weapon in the grass. She knew she could dismount and mount again, after securing it, before he could gain her side, and she hastily made the attempt, still clinging tightly to the bridle-reins.

As she struck the ground, a mocking laugh broke from the lips of the masked horseman, and as she glanced toward him in alarm, she saw a leveled pistol—saw a puff of smoke—and rearing upward, her good horse fell heavily to the ground!

"Will you follow, my dear lady?" laughed Masked Mark as he wheeled and spurred rapidly away. "Adieu, until our next meeting, fair Adola!"

A sobbing cry of rage broke from her lips.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PARSON TRIES HIS LUCK.

As though bent on suicide, Jessie Roberts leaped from the flat rock into the rapidly sweeping waters, uttering only that one sharp cry, full of indignant reproach.

Fortunately she took the reckless leap from the side up the river, and as the swift current caught hold, she was whirled around against the rock. The water was not deep, barely reaching to her waist, and she clasped her hands over her head as though she would dive into the deeper water toward the bank from which Alva Bohee had swum; but before she could do more, the young man recovered from the half-stupor into which her wholly unexpected action had cast him, and caught her form in his arms, lifting her to the rock again by main strength, holding her quivering figure close to his own, as though resolved to guard against a repetition of the suicidal action.

"Jessie—how could you?" he huskily muttered.

She struggled to free herself, averting her face when he sought to look into it, her voice strained and quivering, yet ringing with indignation:

"You have no right—you insulted me! Let me go if you are a man—if you are not the heartless villain they say!"

Instead, those muscular arms infolded the quivering form still more closely, lifting her higher until she could feel the strong, regular throbbing of his heart against her own. And though he spoke never a word in reply, there was some subtle power in his steady gaze that slowly, surely, forced her eyes to raise, tremblingly and half-veiled, until they met his.

Only for an instant did they meet, but that was long enough for Jessie to read a wondrous truth that set her poor heart to fluttering more wildly than ever!

As they lowered, as her pale cheeks more than regained their wonted degree of color, a smile chased away the serious, half-scared look from the face of the young man, and his head moved toward hers, as though he would repeat the action which came so near driving her to a watery grave.

As though she divined this, Jessie Roberts abruptly brought her powers into play, so suddenly and adroitly that, almost before he could realize her intent, Alva Bohee found his arms empty. She retreated a pace from him, standing on the dampened edge of the rock, one hand partially raised as though to warn him back. Her deep blue eyes were glowing. Her cheeks had grown pale again. She looked half-frightened, half-indignant.

The young ranchero saw that his victory was still far from being assured, and the smile faded from his face. His tones were grave and gentle as he spoke:

"I—insulted you, Jessie? Surely, you cannot think that! You misunderstood me. Why, little one, I'd rather lose my good right arm, than to give you even one slight pang!"

The blue eyes winked rapidly as though to clear themselves from a mist, but their owner motioned the speaker to keep his place. She said nothing. She seemed afraid to trust her tongue to speech, just then.

Alva Bohee saw this, and came very near the truth; but he knew, too, that his little brown thrush was a shy bird, and that a single incautious movement might cause her to renew her flight—perhaps to death.

"Listen to me, little girl," he said, his tones grave and gentle, his honest eyes speaking even more clearly than his tongue. "I was wrong to act so abruptly, perhaps, but your generous defense of me against my enemies made me forget that my lips had not uttered what my eyes and actions surely have long ago told you—that I love you, little one!"

She shrunk back, her partially extended hand trembling perceptibly as he uttered these words. Then, with an effort, she rallied, facing him with some of the old-time spirit that had first awakened his amusement, then his interest.

"Stop! you are adding insult to insult! You are laughing at the poor, silly child who has served to amuse your idle hours—you are proying yourself what they called you!"

"They? Demas Fee, you mean Jessie?" with a faint smile.

"Among others—yes. I called him a liar then, but now, I begin to fear he formed a truer opinion of you than I did—that you are the wolf in sheep's clothing he called you!"

The smile grew fainter now, and the blue eyes of the young ranchero filled with a harder light.

"Those were his words, Jessie? That the openly expressed opinion of the worthy youth who was to have been my brother-in-law? Well, some day I may thank him for his kindness, as that kindness deserves. Meanwhile, are you determined to condemn me wholly unheard?"

"You can say nothing that I ought to listen to," was the hurried reply. "I have listened to you—have trusted you too much!"

"You think me all bad, then, little one?"

She flung out one hand impulsively, her features showing how hard the ordeal was becoming to her. But her voice gained strength and evenness as she spoke swiftly:

"What can I think, when I look at you—when I remember who and what you are—then turn and look at myself! A poor, ignorant, border girl, who never knew the tender care of a mother—whose whole life has been passed in—but why go over it all, when you know the simple facts better than I can repeat them? One look at you—another at me—and the whole is said!"

"With the odds altogether on your side, little one," Alva Bohee said, quickly, but pausing as she made a pained gesture.

He stood in silence, watching the bowed, yet defiant form, graceful and strangely attractive, despite the ugly dress, now more shapeless than ever, as the water dripped from its skirt.

He was at a loss how to address her. She was so peculiar in many things. She was so shy, yet so quick to take offense; so simple and unsophisticated, yet so suspicious. A single ill-chosen word might send her into the whirling waters again, to meet her death, despite his utmost endeavors to save her. He felt that she loved him, yet he dared not act on that belief, eager though he was to win the sweet confession from her lips.

It was a peculiar situation, painful, yet pleasant.

"Jessie, we have both said too much not to reach a full and perfect understanding with each other before we part, this day," he said, slowly, weighing his words carefully, ready to stop or change their aim the instant her actions warned him of danger. "If I have offended you, I humbly beg your pardon, and earnestly promise not to offend in a like manner again. I lost my head for the moment, but your kind and generous words were partly the occasion. You so nobly defended me against my enemies, who show their teeth behind my back, and in doing so you proved yourself a friend in the truest sense of the word. Heaven knows I have few enough such, in this region!"

"Is that your fault, or theirs?" quickly asked the girl, her earnest eyes trying to read the truth in his face.

"What do you think, Jessie?"

"It is not for me to say, Mr. Bohee."

"Not when I ask you? Well, then will you tell me what the people who have warned you against me say? What crimes do they lay at my door?"

"I would rather not," she replied, slowly.

"Then I will have to ask them—and first among them, Mr. Demas Fee," he added, quietly, but with a certain hard ring to his tones that caused her to give a little start as she impulsively cried:

"You will—you dare ask him for an explanation? I told him he spoke falsely when he said you are a craven-heart!"

"What else did he say, Jessie?" and Alva smiled softly, in no wise displeased by her vehemence.

The girl flushed a little as she saw that smile, and read its meaning aright. She felt that she had partly betrayed herself, and that knowledge lent her greater courage.

"If the words hurt you, sir, don't blame me. You insist on my telling you what the neighbors say, and perhaps it is just as well. If not from my lips, you must learn it all from others, sooner or later."

"And better from the lips of a friend—or one who has given me cause to regard her as a friend—than from those of an avowed enemy. Speak on, little one, and spare me not."

"They say you have lost little sleep because of the murder of your brother," began Jessie, her voice trembling as though she feared to wound him too deeply. "They say you care more for the property he left you, than for vengeance on the assassin. They say you have made no effort to solve the mystery which surrounds that tragedy; and some even hint at still worse!"

She ceased speaking, the young ranchero turned so white and his face became so stern and hard-set. She was frightened at the effect of her words, and seeing this, Alva Bohee forced a smile, saying:

"Let me hear the worst, then, little one;

though how even the bitterest of enemies can bring worse charges against a brother, passes my comprehension!"

"It is whispered—by just whom, I cannot say—that he—that you had a hand in the crime!"

"That I killed, or hired my brother killed, you mean?"

"It is a lie—a horrible calumny!" Jessie impulsively ejaculated, her hands reaching toward the young man, forgetting herself in her great sympathy for him. "I never heard it hinted but once, and then I proclaimed it a base falsehood, black and cruel as the vile heart that gave it birth!"

Alva took her hands, bowing his bare head over them and gently touching them to his lips. She quickly drew them away, but she no longer shrunk back, no longer seemed to be afraid of him. He was so pale, so stunned by that horrible charge or insinuation, that her generous heart went out to him as it had never done before.

"I thank you, little one," he said, his voice hard and strained, as though the words were difficult to force through his throat. "I never dreamed that there lived a being vile enough to even hint at such a horrible suspicion! Heaven help the author if I ever meet him face to face!"

"I cannot tell you who first breathed the suspicion—I would not if I could," hurriedly added Jessie.

"I do not ask you, little one," and Alva Bohee partly conquered his strong emotion, his voice becoming more natural. "All the same, I will find him in good time, and then—"

"But this is not all people say of me, is it, little one? A while ago you said something about my being a coward."

"That he called you one—not that you were such."

Alva smiled faintly, kindly, at her quick correction.

"Of course you would not be so ungrateful, after I have proven my courage and presence of mind—by getting you into this awkward scrape! Ah, little one! I wanted to shine in your eyes as a hero, and now—behold!" with a shrug of his shoulders and a quizzical glance around them that brought a smile to her lips and a laugh to her blue eyes.

"If nothing else, you have proven Demas Fee wrong in one respect," she retorted, with a merry laugh in her tones.

"The worthy Demas again? Do you know, little one, I'm seriously afraid that when next we meet, there will be a little breach of the peace between the honest Demas and myself?"

"I hope not!" and all traces of merriment vanished from her face and voice. "That would suit him too well! It is just what he has been longing for—to get a chance to do you bodily injury. Promise me—"

She ceased abruptly, flushing warmly, conscious that she was betraying too much interest in the one whom, only a few minutes before, she had accused of insulting her.

"Not that I will prove myself the coward he charges me with being, little one," was the grave reply. "What was it the gentleman said against me, that I have disproved by my hasty action this day?"

"Well," and there came a mischievous twinkle into the honest blue eyes, "you know you dress different from the rest of the people around here, on the Rackabout Range. That, and your white hands, your fair complexion and your general gravity, has led some of the men to nickname you the 'Parson.'"

"As I have heard, indirectly. Well?"

"Demas Fee was at our house yesterday, and as usual he had something to throw out against you. Among other things, he said that the Parson cared more for his fine clothes than he did for any living being save himself; that he was like a cat—would go a mile around rather than cross a puddle, for fear of wetting his dainty feet!"

"Full of fun, the doughty Demas is! He is not afraid of mud and mire, though, and seems to delight in slime."

"I remembered his sneers, when I saw you climbing up on this rock," she added, with a low laugh, "and I wished that he might chance along to see how completely your actions gave him the lie."

"Let him pass, little one—his name leaves a bad taste in my mouth. He is a rude, rowdyish, hard-drinking ruffian, and I am sorry that he sees so much of you."

"His father and my father are old friends."

"I know; but it is the son I am objecting to, Jessie," and with a quick motion he caught and imprisoned both of her hands within his own.

"Little one—may the Parson try his luck? May he show his heart to you as it really is? May he tell you all—tell you that in his sight you are all the world—heaven and earth combined to him?"

She strove to release her hands, averting her head so he could not see her face, but he held her firmly, gently, adding:

"Jessie, I love you—idolize you!"

She turned upon him swiftly, her eyes glowing, her face pale as death, her voice hard and unnatural, as she cried:

"There it is! Such words from you to me are an insult as merciless as your action a bit ago! For shame! to abuse the power won by your own carelessness in this manner!"

"The love of an honest man can convey no insult, Jessie," he replied earnestly, his voice a little unsteady. "It may be scorned, refused as unworthy, but it can carry no insult with it, least of all when it is as warm and true as mine for you."

A hard, harsh laugh parted her lips, and she boldly confronted him, though he still held her hands imprisoned.

"Look at me, and then at yourself, Mr. Bohee. Contrast our stations in life. Think how poor, how untaught, how humble I am, how ignorant of all that goes to make a lady of your rank in life; then remember how you have been brought up. Rich, well educated, used to fine society, and—"

"Over head-and-ears in love with you, my dainty little brown thrush," murmured Alva, drawing her closer to him, passing one arm about her waist and pressing her lips with his warm ones despite her struggles to repulse him.

"Jessie, you are arguing against fate! You are mine, and I am yours, for all time. You dare not say you hate me—you dare not deny the tale your eyes have so often told—the sweet admission they have made, time and time again. You dare not say you do not love me, even as I love you!"

"I dare—I do say it!" she panted, her eyes meeting his ardent gaze firmly, though her cheeks burned like fire. "If I am poor, ignorant, the child of a penniless squatter, ugly—"

"Beautiful and sweet as the brown thrush, little one!"

A short, convulsive sob rose in her throat, and the bright eyes dimmed. It was hard to fight him thus—harder still to fight her own weakness.

He touched her lips again tenderly, almost reverently, and his voice was low and serious as he added:

"In my eyes, you are a queen, Jessie, and more lovely than an angel just come from heaven. And now, tell me, Jessie, if I am so much your superior, so much higher and worthier than you are, why I have sought you so often? Why have I spent so many hours watching for you, planning to meet you, plotting for a word, a look, a smile?"

As he spoke, her eyes sunk, she averted her face as far as possible under the circumstances, though he could catch a glimpse of her reddening cheek. Her voice was low and scarcely to be distinguished above the roar of the waters.

"They asked me that question, and then answered it."

"The ubiquitous Demas Fee, you mean?"

"Not him alone, but others; my father among them."

"At least he is an honest man, and his opinion worthy of respect. I will give it all that, but if it be wrong, I claim the right to prove it such. What was it he said, little one?"

"That you were simply seeking to kill time—that would otherwise hang heavily upon your hands," she replied, with a burst of desperate courage, lifting her eyes to his, watching him closely. "That you were trying to blind my eyes to the vast difference between us, only to ride away and laugh at the poor, silly, credulous girl who had forgotten herself so far as to believe your smooth, plausible tongue!"

"Your father said this, Jessie?"

"Among others—yes."

"And you believed him? You still believe him?"

It was a hard question, and Alva Bohee knew it when he uttered the words. She quivered and shrunk away, her eyes drooping. She sought to free herself from his close embrace, but he only held her the tighter as he spoke again:

"You cannot look me in the eyes and say that you believe me the cruel, heartless trifier they would make out, little one. In your heart you feel that I am true to you, even though I have delayed uttering the words that would banish all doubts, even from the mind of those who like me least."

"Jessie, I love you. I ask you to become my wife. I promise to guard and cherish you as the dearest, most precious treasure Heaven ever vouchsafed to man."

"I admit that I did not mean to utter these words so soon. I have fought against the temptation, fearful lest winning your love should make me forgetful of or slow in pressing to the bitter end the one object that brought me to this region. But now I utter them. I ask you to be my wife."

He ceased speaking, as though waiting for her answer; but she made none. She hung an almost lifeless weight upon his arm, her frame quivering like a leaf with powerful emotion.

It was a silence more eloquent than words, and a bright smile lit up the pale, handsome countenance as it bent once more over her face. His lips touched hers, softly, reverently, as though he felt it a sacred seal to a solemn covenant.

"With you, little one, my life that I feared was wrecked forever will become blessed and

full of peace. Without you, it would be accursed—a desert waste. Jessie, little one, have you no answer for me?"

Slowly, shyly, the dark blue eyes lifted until they encountered his ardent gaze. For one instant they met, then she hung her head again. But it was enough. In that one instant Alva Bohee read the whole truth, and whatever doubts he may have entertained—and doubts he had had, though he had seemingly been so confident—were forever banished.

His right hand gently caressed the curling locks of red-gold hair, his voice grave and earnest as he spoke again:

"I have loved you almost from the moment when my eyes first rested upon your bright face, little one. I tried to cheat myself—tried to make myself believe that I only regarded you as a friend with whom I could pass away a few of the weary hours which must roll by while I was perfecting my plans to discover the demon who murdered my poor brother; but all the time I knew better. The time came when I could not keep up even this poor pretense, but I repeated my oath to entertain no other aim in life while poor Oren remained unavenged. I meant to keep the vow, then, but to-day, when I believed your dear life was in great danger—when I felt that you owed your life to me—when you innocently showed your love by your indignant defense of me against my traducers—I knew that my love was greater than all else!

"It was this knowledge that led me to clasp you in my arms and touch your lips in a caress pure as though it came from an angel—that I swear to you, little one!"

He repeated the action again, but apparently the little brown thrush was growing accustomed to it, for certainly she fluttered but little, and that little very ineffectually.

In truth, she was nearly wild with joy. Her head seemed whirling round and round in a dizzy dance. Her little heart was throbbing until its pulsations showed plainly through the gay-colored calico dress. It was very sweet to rest there in his strong arms and listen to his ardent words—very dear and very precious were those words to the border girl!

And Alva Bohee, too, seemed to enjoy the situation, though their situation was far from comfortable, otherwise. They both forgot their surroundings for the time being; forgot that they were on a small, flat rock in the middle of the river, with swift water all around them, and lacking any means of reaching the shore without outside assistance.

How long this blissful dream might have lasted, can only be guessed by those who have "been through the mill" themselves, but they were suddenly brought back to earth and everyday life by the loud, harsh voice of a fellow-being, coming from the slope near where Alva Bohee had cast aside his hat and coat before entering the water.

"Hellow! what in time be you critters doin' out thar?"

CHAPTER V.

SATAN STILL FAVORS HIS OWN.

FOR the space of a single breath, Adola Fee was wholly taken aback by this unexpected move on the part of Masked Mark.

When she saw him level his revolver with that hard, bitter laugh, she believed that he meant to murder her, as the shortest, surest method of getting out of the tangle she had woven about him. The shot came so speedily that she had no time to flinch or to prepare her own weapon for use, and as the stricken horse reared up, then plunged forward as though pierced through the brain, it came perilously near crushing her beneath its body. The quick, sharp jerk on the bridle-rein partially destroyed her balance, and when she recovered herself, Masked Mark was bowing with exaggerated politeness and uttering his mocking farewell.

Both words and tone stung her sharply, and a cry of angry, impotent hatred escaped her lips as she deftly unlocked the barrel of her recovered weapon and thrust a couple of cartridges into as many chambers.

She dared wait to load no more, for Masked Mark was riding rapidly away over the grassy plain, glancing back over his shoulder as he leaned far over upon the neck of his gallant blood-bay, doubtless anticipating her intentions.

Out shot her right arm, and twice in rapid succession the glittering weapon spoke, an almost savage prayer accompanying the bits of lead as they cut through the air—a prayer that they might cut twin passages through the heart of the one whom she firmly believed had foully assassinated her lover.

Eagerly the woman peered through the thin veil of smoke, holding her breath, her heart almost ceasing to pulsate as she watched the effect of her hasty shots; only to cast the faithless weapon far from her and utter a gasping, strained cry of baffled rage and unsatisfied hatred as she saw Masked Mark raise erect in his saddle and wave one gloved hand toward her as though in taunting defiance.

"Again—Satan still favors his own!" she hoarsely cried, watching the rapidly receding rider, her hands clinched so tightly that blood oozed from the nail-pierced palms and stained

the gloves she wore. "Must it ever be so? Shall that merciless demon never be brought to pay the penalty of his atrocious crime? Have I perjured myself in the sight of high Heaven when I swore to bring him to the gallows? No!" and her golden-spurred boot stamped the prairie sward fiercely, her jetty eyes gleaming as though ablaze, while her white teeth clicked together. "Ten thousand times no! I repeat the oath—and may Heaven forget me if I forget this obligation!"

Strong emotion choked her voice, and she gazed after the rapidly-receding horseman in a tumult of impotent hatred and baffled vengeance. She saw that he was shaping his course so that ere long he would gain or pass close by one of the timber islands, in either case to vanish from her sight.

Would she ever encounter him again? Would she ever again be so near to avenging the ruthless assassination of her betrothed husband?

If she only had a horse—if she was only strong and active enough to follow and keep the audacious murderer in sight until he sought his retreat, or until she could summon some one to her aid!

She turned her eyes regretfully toward the black form that lay so still and powerless at her side, its glossy neck stained with something thicker, clammier than sweat. Only for that dastard shot!

"But even that shall not save the demon!" Adola cried, the words grating fiercely betwixt her clinched teeth as she turned hurriedly in the direction she had hurled the empty revolver. "I'll take his trail—I'll follow it until it leads me to his den, or until I drop dead in my tracks, but—"

Only for her intense excitement the young woman must long ere this have caught the sound of other hoofstrokes than those of Masked Mark's flight, for the double report of her revolver had reached the ears of the coming rider whom the man with the hidden face had espied far away over the plain. He had quickly located the spot from whence the alarm sounded, and looking to his own weapons, pressed spurs to the flanks of his good horse, riding swiftly forward—and still more swiftly when he drew near enough to recognize the woman's form. And then his manly voice rung out sharp and clear:

"Adola—Miss Fee!"

With a joyous ejaculation she lifted her head from the hurried search in the grass for the discarded weapon, her dark eyes filling with renewed hope as she recognized the rider.

"Barry Carlsworth—surely Heaven sent you to my aid!"

"Adola—you are hurt? You have met with an accident? For heaven's sake tell me it is not serious! Tell me you are not dangerously hurt!"

In hardly recognizable tones the horseman uttered these words, throwing himself from the still rushing steed with a reckless disregard for his own bones that told how all-absorbing was his interest in the young woman before him. Love for her showed in every accent, in every line of his boldly handsome countenance. He sprang toward her with outstretched hands, as though he felt that she needed his support, but instantly paused as she raised one hand impatiently and cried:

"Not me—I'm unhurt—it is that red-handed demon yonder—Masked Mark! Quick! if you are a man, Barry Carlsworth, mount and kill or capture that devil in human guise! Bring him back to me, dead or alive, and I will bless you with my dying breath! Quick, man! don't you see how rapidly the merciless demon is fleeing? Mount and follow—follow him to his death or to the gallows!"

Wildly, almost incoherently the words poured across her lips. She motioned toward the rapidly receding figure of the man with the hidden face. She caught Barry Carlsworth by the arm and pushed him toward his panting horse. In her wild rage and excitement she shook him as though he were but a wayward child who deserved punishment for obstinacy in refusing to obey orders!

And Barry Carlsworth? A glad light of relief had shot into his face when he heard her say that she was unhurt, but it was as quickly driven away by her passionate words concerning Masked Mark. He turned paler than ever, and cast a look toward the distant horseman that might easily be interpreted as one of fear!

Yet Barry Carlsworth did not look much like a coward, or one a prey to superstition.

Not every day could one find as perfect a specimen of manly grace and power combined; well-proportioned, muscular and active; quick and easy in his movements; one whom, if gifted with courage in proportion, few men could assail with the certainty of coming off the victor.

His friends would readily aver that Barry Carlsworth lacked naught that goes to make up a man of nerve and "sand," that he was never known to flinch or lose color in the face of odds; that he would face the foul fiend himself as readily as a single human foe, should such an emergency ever arise; but still it was a fact that his face grew white and his figure trembled slightly, but perceptibly, as he gazed over the plain at the fleeing form of Masked Mark.

Adola Fee saw him tremble, and she shook him even more fiercely than before, her voice harsh and strained.

"Man! will you never comprehend? Mount and follow that demon in human shape! Kill your horse if needs be, but do not let that red-handed assassin escape you! Bring him back to me, alive if you can; but bring him back!"

"Who is it? What has he done?" Barry Carlsworth managed to utter, as her voice again choked and failed her.

"The demon who calls himself Masked Mark!"

"Why, he's a detective! an officer of the law!" he ejaculated, his face brightening as he uttered the words.

"A lie—a barefaced fraud, by means of which he hopes to guard his neck while he works out the rest of his bloody schemes!" she cried, impatiently. "I tell you he is cheating justice every minute he is suffered to draw the breath of life! I proclaim him a vile assassin! I swear that he murdered my betrothed—the man whom you once declared to be dearer to your heart than a brother!"

"No! Adola, you are mistaken in—"

"I am not mistaken, I tell you!" she cried passionately, releasing his arm and flinging it from her with angry vehemence. "His hands are even now red with the life-blood of my love—my all! See!" and she pointed to her horse as it lay motionless in the rank grass. "He shot it down, to escape from my vengeance. If he was innocent, would he go as far as that? No! he is guilty, and if you are afraid—"

"Adola!"

"If you are afraid to follow him, lend me your horse, and woman though I am, I will follow him until I bring his throat to the noose of the hangman—or send a bullet through his scheming brain!"

She sprang toward the free horse, but it avoided her grasp, frightened by her wild air and sudden motions. Barry Carlsworth sprang to her side, and caught her wrist with one strong hand, holding the other out toward his well-trained horse. Slowly, sniffing dubiously, the animal came toward him and was caught by the bridle.

"Lend him to me—give me a revolver, and stand aside!"

"Adola," and there was strong reproach in both face and tones, "you wrong me when you use such language."

"And you are wasting time that is precious—you are giving that demon law enough to insure his escape? Barry Carlsworth, you once declared that my word was law to you, that you would lay down your life at my lightest sign!"

"I did—and I repeat the vow now, Adola."

"Prove it, rather! Mount and follow that demon! Kill or capture him, or never more let me see your face or hear your voice! Quick—or the demon will escape!"

She cast a hurried glance in the direction taken by Masked Mark. He was more than a mile away, riding at a gallop, and rapidly increasing the distance between them.

So rapid had been her words, so hurried her actions, that hardly a minute had elapsed since Barry Carlsworth uttered his first cry of recognition; and little more than twice that length of time had passed since Masked Mark turned and rode away from the enemy whom he had so adroitly rendered helpless.

Adola heard the quick rattle of leather as she glanced toward the retreating horseman, and a glad cry parted her lips as she turned and beheld Barry Carlsworth seated in the saddle, his pale face showing stern and determined.

"I will do your bidding the best I can, Adola," he said, gravely, as he touched spurs to the flanks of his horse and shot past her. "If I fail, 'twill not be by my fault!"

"You must not fail!" she cried, fiercely. "Alive, if you can, as food for the gallows; dead if you must—but bring him back to me, one way or the other!"

He was far away over the plain as her last words sounded on the air, but he heard and understood them, as his waving hand bore evidence.

And as Adola Fee gazed after him, she saw the man with the hidden face, now almost in line with her and his pursuer, turn in his saddle to gaze back. A short, hard laugh parted her lips, and her pale face was convulsed with a wild, fierce joy as she muttered harshly:

"Ay! you red-handed demon! It is not a poor, weak woman who is on your trail now, but a man with strength and courage sufficient to cope even with your boasted powers! May evil befall your horse! May your patron saint desert you now, in your hour of greatest need! May an outraged justice cast you alive into his hands, that you may suffer a shameful death on the gallows, where I can curse and revile you in your last moments!"

After all, she was hardly accountable for her words, and in recording them, we must remember how frightfully she had suffered.

Adola Fee inherited strong passions from both sides of her house. She lost her mother while a mere child, and had grown to womanhood without the judicious control that might have subdued her fierce temper.

She learned to love Oren Bohee as woman

rarely loves in these days. She made him her god, and her love was little less than adoration. The day appointed for their wedding was near at hand, and the angry opposition which she had at first met with from her father and her brother, died away; an opposition that had served to deepen her love and render it all the more intense. She was happy, and the whole world seemed a beautiful garden of flowers. It was an exquisite joy simply to live and breathe. It was heaven itself to look forward to the hour which was to unite them forever!

Instead, the morn of their intended wedding broke on a corpse, bloody, insensate, making no sign even when the bride elect lay prone upon its bosom and begged those cold lips, as she kissed them wildly, to speak to her.

For a time all who saw and heard her then, believed that Adola Fee would never live through that frightful ordeal; or, if her bodily powers proved equal to the strain, that she would ever retain her reason.

For days and weeks she lay raving wildly, calling on the loved one who was now deep under the sod. Then she arose from her bed, pale, hard, wild-eyed, but with her reason apparently restored. From that day she had only one aim in life: to ferret out the assassin of her betrothed and bring him to justice. To all outward appearance, she was sane as ever, but it may be doubted whether she was not actually insane.

Breathing that wild, fierce prayer, Adola Fee watched the chase until Masked Mark disappeared from view around the edge of the timber island of which mention has already been made. She saw that Barry Carlsworth was pressing hard upon his trail, and knew that even this early in the chase he had gained considerable distance. Her eyes flashed fire as she muttered:

"He will succeed! Heaven has heard my prayer! Oren will be avenged, and then—I care not how soon I go to keep him company in his lonely grave!"

She hunted hurriedly around until she discovered the revolver which, in her mad rage at the escape of Masked Mark, she had hurled from her, and filling the empty chambers with cartridges as she ran, hastened along on the double trail, giving no thought to the horse that lay where the deftly-planted lead of the man with the hidden face had dropped it in its tracks. She thought only of the chase—had room in her madly-whirling brain for nothing else. She wanted to see the end of the chase, if possible, and hoped to be a witness to the downfall of Masked Mark if she could only gain the further side of that clump of timber in time.

But rapidly as she ran over the grass-grown plain, she had not covered one-half the distance when the faint sound of fire-arms came floating to her ears, and she paused, panting, one hand pressed tightly over her heart in the vain effort to still its furious throbbings.

What did those shots portend? Had Barry Carlsworth overtaken Masked Mark and killed or crippled him? Was the foul assassination of Oren Bohee at last avenged? Or—

A wild cry gurgled from her pale lips at the thought that the man with the hidden face might once more have proved triumphant—might have slain or disabled his pursuer!

"Not that! Heaven would not be so cruel!" she gasped.

She hastened forward again, only to pause, staggering blindly, a hoarse, inarticulate cry rising in her throat, for riding at a sharp angle with the course the chase had followed until passing behind the *motte*, she caught sight of a single horseman. And that horseman was Masked Mark!

To all seeming, he had altered his course simply that she might catch a glimpse of him, for even as she gazed with wild eyes, he drew rein, rose erect in his stirrups and removing his hat, swung it around his head. Faintly there came to her ears a shout. She could not distinguish the words, if any were uttered, but its meaning was clear enough to her, even in her half-crazed condition.

Masked Mark was exulting in her renewed defeat.

The thought spurred her on to active motion. She would not give way so easily. If she could recover Barry Carlsworth's horse, she might even yet bring the audacious villain to bay!

With this idea Adola Fee ran rapidly along the trail and neared the timber island, behind which Barry Carlsworth had plainly come to grief. She cast an occasional glance toward the masked rider, marking the course he took in order to strike it at its furthest point should she recover the horse.

As the shortest course, Adola pressed straight through the *motte*, springing out upon the plain, to pause with a cry of mingled horror and chagrin.

On the ground lay two figures, both motionless as though dead! On its side lay the sorrel horse, and a few feet beyond, in a line with its head and neck, as though he had been hurled from the saddle with deadly force, lay Barry Carlsworth!

As though the sound of her wild cry had awakened him to renewed life, he struggled

feebly, uttering a hollow groan as he raised his head from the grass.

For one instant Adola forgot Masked Mark and her longing for vengeance, as she darted toward the fallen man with a cry that was almost joyful. At least, his death did not lie at her door!

"What is it? What has happened?" the young man huskily muttered, as Adola knelt beside him and supported his dirt-covered head in her lap. "I caught a glimpse of a man—"

He broke off with a sharp cry, staggering to his feet and glaring fiercely around him as he hastily wiped the blood and dust from his face with one hand, the other feeling for a revolver at his waist. He seemed to remember now!

A hard, hysterical laugh parted the lips of Adola Fee, as she also arose, and with clinched fist shaking in the direction where Masked Mark had vanished from sight, she cried:

"The foul fiend still befriends you, Masked Mark, but the tide will turn at last; the gallows will claim its own—and my hand shall drag you there to die the death of a sheep-killing cur. I swear it, by all that is right and holy!"

Barry Carlsworth gazed at her pale, convulsed features like one in a dream, and as she ceased he muttered vacantly:

"Who and what is he, this Masked Mark? Why do you hate him so desperately, Adola?"

CHAPTER VI.

A TOUGH OLD KNOT TO CRACK.

THE next moment beheld a transformation scene on a small scale, Jessie slipping from the warm embrace of the young ranchero with a little cry of—was it displeasure?

Alva Bohee was startled, as well, and made no immediate effort to regain or retain her recently-won treasure. And standing side by side on the flat rock in the middle of the river, they rapidly scanned the shore for the author of that rude, harsh voice.

Their quest was brief, for the speaker came scrambling down the slope to the water's edge, staring at them as though trying to divine how the young couple came there and why.

"It's father—and he'll be just hopping!" murmured Jessie in an undertone as the rough, coarsely-clad figure came into fair view. "If only the canoe was here!"

"It is my fault that it isn't here, and I'll meekly suffer the consequences, little one," quickly replied Alva, in the same guarded tone, but with a half-laugh in his voice that brought the smile back to her lips and the merry light to her great blue eyes.

"Durned if it ain't!" came explosively across the water as the new-comer shaded his eyes with one curved palm, as though he had until then been unable to believe their evidence. "The Parson an'—you, Jes'!"

"Hello, pap!" came the clear response.

"What in time you pesky critters doin' out thar? How'd the Parson git into sech a scrape, an' whar's your boat?"

"Let it go at that, little one," hurriedly breathed the young ranchero; "let him think it was my clumsiness, and—"

"He knows better—he has seen your coat on the bank," as swiftly uttered the girl, then lifting her voice she answered her parent: "The canoe has gone over the falls, and if a 'fresh' should come down before you contrive some way to get us off this claim, I reckon we'll have to take the same trip."

She had resumed her usual pert, half-defiant demeanor now, and much as he had been amused by it when first making her acquaintance, Alva Bohee could not help feeling that the alteration was for the worse.

"Sarve ye right to let ye stick it out a night or two—it jes' *would*, now!" they could hear the surly fellow growl as he turned partly away.

"Where does he keep his boat, little one?" asked Alva, one eye on the grim old fellow, while he swiftly snatched a kiss from the red-ripe lips.

"Have yourself, do!" and Jessie slipped away from him, but the glow that filled her eyes was hardly indicative of anger. "Never do that again—while any one's looking on!"

The conclusion of the sentence was very low, but the ears of a lover are proverbially keen, and Alva understood her. Unluckily for him, just then Dike Roberts turned toward them, one hand holding the lasso near where Bohee had tied it around the trunk of the stunted cedar tree.

"Git ready, thar, you Jes'!" he cried, drawing the lasso in hand over hand.

"What does he mean, little one?" hurriedly asked Alva, his face growing pale as he took in the expanse of swiftly running water which must be crossed. "Surely he does not mean—you can not get ashore without a boat of some kind!"

"And that shows how little you know me, Mr. Bohee," with a short, merry laugh. "If I don't know all that makes up a fine lady, I'm perfect in some things. If pap didn't think so awful much of me, he'd yell for me to jump in and swim to dry land."

Alva stared at the speaker, thinking surely she was jesting; but not so. Her face was quiet and business-like, and it was clear she not only felt capable of performing the feat, but that she

really considered her father unnecessarily careful of her little self.

"He is mad to even think of such a thing!" cried Bohee, excitedly. "He must get a boat—you shall not risk your precious life in any such reckless manner!"

"There is no risk—not the slightest," was the quick reply, and then, with a bright flashing of her eyes and firm setting of her shapely lips, she added: "Must is an awful big word to use to a little girl like me, Parson—and it's a word that brushes my temper the wrong way, too!"

"You Jes'! Git ready to ketch holt, thar!" cried the old squatter, as he swung the recovered coil of the lasso around his head, then latched the damp line across the water.

The cast was a sure one, and the young ranchero caught the noosed end, bracing himself against the jerk as the swiftly rushing waters caught the slack. He tightened the line, but before he could do more or renew his half-indignant protestations against her running such risks, Jessie slipped the noose over her head and shoulders, and with a little reckless laugh, leaped from the flat rock into the water, her weight tearing the lasso from the grasp of her lover, it came so suddenly and unexpectedly.

Dike Roberts evidently expected something of the kind, for bracing himself among the rocks which lined the shore, he swiftly and steadily drew in on the rope, keeping it taut as the border girl deftly cleft the water.

For a single breath Alva Bohee stood utterly amazed by the audacious action, then, with a half-angry, half-frightened cry he leaped from the rock and swam rapidly after Jessie, resolved to give his own life before aught of harm should come to her. But he had taken less than a score of strokes when he saw that there was little cause for fear on her account. She swam swiftly and easily, a half-malicious smile on the merry face that was partly turned toward him, a silent challenge in her bright blue eyes. And accomplished swimmer though he was, with few superiors among his list of acquaintances, the young ranchero found himself unable to overtake the girl, though he could see that Dike Roberts was doing little more now than keeping the lasso from sinking in a curve to the bottom of the river.

Jessie struck shore a few seconds ahead, and turned as though to lend her lover a helping hand; but it was not needed, and had it been, the suddenly-tightened rope about her chest would have prevented her.

"Git out o' the drink an' shake yerself, gal," roughly exclaimed the squatter, frowning darkly as he noted her impulse. "The Parson don't need any o' your help now—though the good land knows I didn't think it was in the white-gilled critter!"

"Possibly you may meet with still other surprises," a little sharply answered the ranchero as he stepped ashore, his cheeks flushing, his eyes sparkling.

The saucy smile left the face of the girl, and she hastily interposed:

"Thank him, father, if you care for your wild little girl. Only for his brave and prompt aid, I would have been swept over the falls, to meet the same fate as my canoe!"

"Git out with your foolishin', Jes'!" muttered the squatter, his dark eyes glittering suspiciously as they swiftly roved from one face to the other and then back again. "You go over the falls? An' you kin give a otter odds an' a lickin' at his own trade!"

"It's so, all the same," and the red head nodded vigorously. "I broke my paddle and lost both ends. I lost my nerve and was afraid to try to swim ashore, and only for the gentleman here, I would have went over the falls. Thank him for it, daddy—or I'll have to do it for both of us!"

Dike Roberts stood watching her closely, one hand rasping over the stubby beard which covered his chin. From her he looked toward Bohee, who opened his lips to speak, but closed them again in obedience to a covert gesture from Jessie.

She thought she could make the signal unseen by her parent, but his keen eyes seemed to take in everything, and he sharply uttered:

"None o' them motionin', gal, I tell ye! They's somethin' bin a-doin' that you want to keep the ole man from findin' out, but it won't work—no, it won't, unless the Parson thar kin lie slicker'n I think he's able fer!"

"Have you ever caught me in a lie, Mr. Roberts?" sharply demanded the young ranchero, stung to the quick by the poorly concealed dislike and contempt which filled the voice of the grim old squatter.

"I hain't never tried as yit," was the dry retort.

"Father, you have no right to insult—"

"I've got the right to tell you to pull out fer the cabin an' hustle out o' them wet duds, I reckon," and he turned sternly upon the indignant girl, frowning as she had seldom known him to frown when addressing her. "You mind your pap, an' mebbe you'll live the longer for't. Git, I tell ye!"

Fiery though her temper was, strong as was her will, Jessie was cowed for once, and with a pleading glance toward the young ranchero, she

turned and hastened up the slope, vanishing from the sight of the two men.

Dike Roberts watched her until she disappeared over the bank, then deliberately coiled up the wet lasso, unfastening it from the cedar, securing the coils with the usual turn and insertion of the end, taking a deliberate look at each coil as he formed them, then saying:

"It's your rope, I judge, Parson?"

Alva Bohee bowed silently, taking the lasso, but dropping it on a dry rock as he pressed the water from his garments as best he could.

"You got ketched out yender on the rock, an' Jes' went to git you off, I reckon?" added the squatter, slowly, his keen eyes watching the young man, who quietly replied:

"You had ought to know your own daughter better than that, Mr. Roberts. She told you the truth."

The wrinkled, weather-beaten countenance turned a shade darker at the reproof, and Dike Roberts hastily added:

"Don't I know that? But was it the *hull* truth? They was some sort o' trick under it, I'm dead sart'in, an' I ain't noways sure you ain't at the bottom of it, nuther!"

"Pray, what am I to understand by that?" coldly asked the young ranchero, his eyes gleaming sternly.

"That my little gal ain't the sort to lose her narve or to git skeered at a bit o' water like this," flinging one hand out toward the river. "She kin swim it anywhar, an' wasn't in no more danger o' goin' over the falls then I be this minnit! That's why I say they must 'a' bin some durned trick into it, an' that's why I ax you, as man to man, what in time it was, an' what it means?"

"Miss Roberts has told you how it happened, and it goes without saying that she told you the simple truth. I have nothing to add to her account," coldly retorted Alva, turning away and beginning to collect his discarded garments.

Dike Roberts picked up the coiled lasso and followed the young ranchero in silence. His strong jaws were firmly set. His small, dark eyes gleamed and glittered with a stern, dangerous light. And in his whole demeanor there was visible a certain dogged resolution that spoke of trouble ahead for the Parson, in case he failed to satisfy the squatter.

Apparently not noticing this, Alva Bohee gathered together his garments, and put them on. When this was done, Dike Roberts tapped him on the shoulder, then passed him in silence up to the level ground where the horse of the young man was placidly grazing.

Alva Bohee followed as silently, his face grave, an anxious light flickering in his eyes. But he frankly met the keen and steady gaze of the squatter as Dike Roberts turned and confronted him, speaking slowly, like a man who was carefully weighing each word before it passed his lips:

"You said down yender that you hedn't nothin' to say, but thar's somethin' I've got to say, an' ef you're not a plum' fool, you'll take it as gospel an' foller it a'cordin'ly."

"I am ready to listen to you, Mr. Roberts."

"An' to take the warnin' I give ye?"

"That depends upon its nature," was the quiet reply.

"It's natur' is jes' this, young man. You've bin wastin' too much time 'round these parts. You hain't got no lawful business that calls you here. The land's free, you'll say, an' I ain't denyin' of that; but it ain't the land that fetches you so often to these parts. It's no good for stock. You can't run a farm onto it. They's too many rocks fer anything but a stone quarry, an' that I know you ain't wantin'."

He ceased speaking, and with a faint smile Alva said:

"You have told me what does not bring me so often to your neighborhood, Mr. Roberts; now permit me to tell you just what attraction it has for me. I come to see your daughter."

"Don't I know that?" almost savagely, his dark eyes glowing dangerously. "Ain't I her father? Cain't I see, when it's things as consarns the child? You come to see her—but you don't want to come no more, or you'll find six foot o' airth—an' you'll go into that hole with a bullet through your heart!"

"You talk as though I was a thief who—"

"What better be ye then a thief, ef you plot to steal off the only precious thing a pore devil hes to his name? But I've give ye fa'r warnin'. You know what to expect, now, an' ef trouble comes o' it, they ain't no one to blame but yourself. It ain't much I ax of ye, Parson; only to keep on your own range an' let me an' mine alone."

"You could not ask more," earnestly cried the young man.

"Nur I won't take no less!"

"You will listen to me if you are at all the man you pride yourself on being, Mr. Roberts."

"What I've said kivers the hull question, Parson."

"From your standpoint, perhaps, but not from mine. You have no right to charge me with intended wrong, and then refuse to hear my defense. It is short: I love your daughter, and I wish to make her my wife. I ask you to

give her to me, and I pledge you my word of honor that I will not only make her as happy as an honest man can make a woman whom he loves more than all the world besides, but I promise that instead of losing a daughter, you shall gain a son in addition."

He spoke rapidly, with great earnestness, his frank eyes meeting that keen, suspicious gaze without flinching. The old squatter saw that he was desperately in earnest, and his countenance perceptibly softened, though his voice was still hard and determined when he made reply, not in his ordinary rude, uncouth manner of pronunciation:

"Mr. Bohee, I see that I have wronged you in part, and for that much I beg your pardon; but I must repeat my warning, and you must keep away from me and mine. Once was when I could stand before you or any man as an equal; but that time is past and gone, never to return. Now, I am only a poor squatter. My child is only a squatter's daughter, and that means she is not one whom you could wed and present to your fine friends in the East without occasionally blushing for her ignorance of their ways and customs."

"Surely I am the better judge of—"

"No you ain't, nuther," interposed the squatter, lapsing into his habitual manner of speaking. "You may think it now, but I know jes' how it would turn out. The time would come when you'd feel sorry fer what you'd done. But that ain't the wu'st."

"Jessie is a good girl, ef I do say it. She's true as steel, with a heart o' gold; but she's got her mother's temper, with a good bit of her pap's to make weight. She needs a man to keep her in the traces—a man who kin keep her love an' at the same time make her respect him clean through."

"And why do you think I would fail in this respect?"

The squatter looked at him, his lip curling, a disagreeable smile playing over his hard features.

"What is it the boys call ye, fer short?"

The young ranchero flushed quickly, but his voice was even and quiet as he replied:

"What has that got to do with this matter?"

"A heap," was the emphatic reply. "They call you 'the Parson'! They say that you want the sand that goes to make a man. They even say that you're a coward."

"Never before my face, I believe. Am I to suffer for what foul-mouthed rowdies say behind my back?"

"Ef you don't stop them from sayin' the same things over an' over—yes," nodded Roberts, his teeth clicking sharply.

"If I were one of them—if I were a drinking, brawling, godless rowdy, your objections to me as a suitor for your daughter's hand would be less great?" half-smiled Bohee.

"Better a rowdy then a white-livered coward, anyhow!"

As he snapped out these words, Dike Roberts turned on his heel and strode swiftly away. As promptly Alva Bohee kept pace with him, disregarding the sullen scowl with which the grim old squatter greeted his action.

"I have heard something of this talk before now, Mr. Roberts, but I passed it by with contempt. I never dreamed that any decent man or woman would misunderstand my conduct, much less think it proved the silly words true. This day my eyes have been opened, for your daughter—"

"Drop that!" with a savage glance. "Let my gal alone, I tell ye once more!"

"When Miss Roberts confirms your decision, not before."

Dike Roberts wheeled upon the speaker with scowling face and harsh, threatening voice.

"What do you mean by that, you critter?"

"That I told Miss Roberts I loved her, and wished to make her my wife. That—"

"You!" with a short, contemptuous laugh.

"You—the Parson—the dandy—the innocent critter who trusts to his baby looks to protect him ag'in the hands o' men! Bah! you dress like a tailor's sign. You perfume your clothes. You kiver your hands with kid gloves, fer fear the sun'll tan 'em up a little. You ride over the Range without a weepson, so you kin hev a good excuse to back out when anybody tramps on your corns. You—tell my Jes' you love her!"

"I did tell her, and—to you, as her sole parent I may say as much, in confidence—she did not seem nearly so bitterly offended as you do now," was the quiet retort.

"The bigger fool her, then! But I say no, an' no I mean. A child o' mine shain't never take up with a meek, whinin', cry-baby of a Parson—not by a durned sight!" growled Roberts.

"How if I change all this? How if I blossom out as a fire-eater, a gambler, a hard drinker? Would I rise in your estimation if I became one of this class?" Alva Bohee demanded, with a half-smile as he followed the irate squatter.

"Do it fu'st, then ax me," was the grim retort.

"I will, at least in part," was the swift, unexpected reply. "You say there are those who have openly charged me with being a coward, because I do not go about the Range roaring

like a crazy lion, armed to the teeth, seeking blood and scalps.

"Your daughter gave me a hint to the same effect, this afternoon, as we stood on the flat rock in the river. She said even *you* declared me a coward."

"Ef I did, I won't deny it now. Mebbe you'd like to try your hand at tannin' my hide, fer the fu'st step?" sneered the grim old squatter, turning again, just as they came in sight of his little log cabin.

"You are her father, and therefore privileged to think and say what you please concerning me," was the grave reply. "There are enough others for me to experiment with."

"Be sure they is," and Roberts chuckled grimly. "Ef you kin live up to your say-so, you won't hev to go fur afore you kin hev a chance to git your han' in, now I tell ye!"

"Let us hope so," was the grave reply.

"Apart from my natural desire to gain a better opinion from you, as the father of the girl I love and hope to win for a life-companion, I feel that the time has come for me to show the inhabitants of Rackabout Range how greatly they have mistaken me."

"Ef they is sand into ye, why hain't you let us hev a peep at it afore this?" curiously asked the old squatter.

"I had my reasons; never mind what they were. I had a certain task to perform, and I believed that the course I have followed was the most certain to lead me to the desired goal."

"Not about your brother?" quickly asked Roberts, his dark eyes filling with a keen interest which he vainly sought to disguise as those blue orbs turned upon him.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. My secret belongs to myself, as yet, though I hope the day will soon come when all men may know it. Until that day, I must decline giving you a more definite answer."

Dike Roberts turned away with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I'll never ax you fer it ag'in, be sure o' that, boy!"

His face was now toward his cabin, and a strange light leaped into it as he paused, one hand touching the young ranchero on the shoulder. And then, before Alva Bohee could ask his meaning, he heard and felt a peculiar "slap" against his silk hat, which stirred it slightly on his head. And a moment later the sharp, clear report of a rifle or revolver came to his ears! With a low ejaculation, he snatched off his hat, and saw that a bullet had pierced it, not two inches above his skull!

CHAPTER XII.

CONVICTED BY HIS OWN LIPS.

AGAIN that hard, hysterical laugh came from the lips of the beautiful Nemesis.

"Who and what is he? Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective, he would tell you, were you bold enough to ask the question of his royal mightiness. And, of course, he would never stoop so low as to stain his immaculate lips with a lie."

Barry Carlsworth made no reply to this impetuous outburst, watching the face of the woman whom he loved best of all in the world, anxiety deepening in his dark eyes. He knew how terribly she had suffered in the recent past and he had been one of those who feared her overtasked brain would never entirely regain its balance. His fears were stronger than ever now, and forgetting his own injuries, he resolved to do or say naught that could add to her frenzied excitement.

It was well to so resolve, but he soon found the task he had set himself was a very difficult one. Adola Fee turned and looked keenly in the direction where she had last observed the man with the hidden face, but he had disappeared in the distance during that interval.

"Lost for now, but not for ever, you demon!" she panted, one clinched hand shaking menacingly in that direction. "It is your turn to laugh, but beware! The gallows is ready, the noose is formed, and they only await your coming—a coming that shall not be much longer delayed, I vow it, before high Heaven!"

"Adola!" gently muttered Barry Carlsworth, but she heard him not, or if so, paid no attention to his words.

"Merciless demon though you are, you are still human enough to leave a trail behind you in your dastardly flight! I'll follow that trail—follow it through fire and water, but what I overtake you again, just when you least expect it! And then—look to yourself, Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective."

With a short, strained laugh the half-crazed woman ended her wild threats, turning abruptly toward Barry Carlsworth, who was watching her with deep anxiety pictured in his face.

"Well, you failed to perform my bidding, Barry Carlsworth," she said sharply. "You neither killed nor captured the red-handed villain. How did he escape you?"

"I did the best I knew," muttered the young man, with a quick glance toward his horse as it made a slight motion with its legs. "You saw how he passed out of sight behind the *motte*. I never dreamed that he would try such a trick, and rounded the timber at full speed, looking

straight ahead to sight him again, instead of to one side. Then—I heard a mocking laugh, and suddenly caught a glimpse of him dashing out of the timber yonder, covering me with his pistol. I whirled and pulled my gun, but he was too quick on the trigger, and I only knew that I was going down in company with my horse. The next I remember was hearing your voice and opening my eyes to see your face bending over me."

"The same trick the cunning demon played on me, only a little varied," bitterly commented Adola. "Since it succeeded in my case, I will not blame you for failing this—Ha!"

She sprung toward the horse, who was giving unmistakable signs of life, its legs quivering, its head slightly lifting, its nostrils distending with short, painful gasps. She bent over the prostrate animal, and parted the thick mane with her gloved fingers, laying bare the track of a bullet. It had not cut deep, missing the spinal cord sufficiently to spare life, but passing close enough to it to cause insensibility.

"The fiend's skill failed him this time!" she cried, with a hard laugh, lifting her pale face toward that of the young man. "Your horse is alive, and will be as sound as ever in a few minutes! It may not be too late even yet for you to take his track—the red-handed assassin!"

"It is a proof of no ordinary degree of skill, rather, Adola," said Carlsworth, gravely, as he examined the wound. "He did not shoot to kill, but to delay. The horse was creased!"

Adola started and gazed keenly into his face for a moment, her thoughts going back to her own good steed who had also fallen before the unerring revolver of the strange man with the hidden face. Might it not be that he had shot with the same intention then? It would be less difficult to perform the feat, surely, on an animal standing motionless than with one racing at speed.

She sprung to her feet and took a few hasty steps toward the timber through which she had recently pressed, but then paused, flinging out one hand impatiently.

Even were her horse alive and recovered by this time, it was so far away that before she could reach and mount, Masked Mark would be such a distance ahead that the idea of overtaking him would be worse than folly. And if his trail was to be followed to his secret retreat, the work could be done more safely after a moderate delay. He would grow weary of watching for followers, and become careless.

Barry Carlsworth was watching her anxiously, with a keen solicitude which he vainly attempted to disguise, and as she paused, he hurriedly uttered:

"Tell me what you want done, Adola, and I'll do it. Anything but leaving you here alone on the prairie," he quickly added, as she cast a glance in the direction in which Masked Mark had disappeared from sight.

"Anything but to follow that red-handed demon, why don't you say?" she cried, with a trace of scorn in face and tone.

"I will follow him, if you bid me, but not until you are in a place of greater safety than this, Adola," he said firmly.

"What matter about me? Who can do me harm, now that demon has fled? Barry Carlsworth, do you know who and what he is?"

She seemed to forget her mingled rage and scorn as she spoke these words, and she moved nearer to the young man, one gloved hand tightly gripping his arm.

"No more than you have told me—only that he is the stranger who is known from one end of Rackabout Range to the other as Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective," he slowly replied.

"Bah! he is a law-breaker, not one whose aim it is to ferret out sin and punish the criminal! His hands are even now reeking with the life-blood of the innocent—the good and pure and noble! At his door lies the death of the man you once called your dearest friend!"

"Adola, surely you are mistaken," muttered Carlsworth.

"I am not!" she impulsively cried. "I accuse him of murdering Oren Bohee, without giving him the ghost of a chance to defend himself! Of sending your friend, your bosom companion, to fill an untimely grave—to be forgotten by all save one poor, heart-broken woman in this short space of time! Oh, Oren! my love—my life! Why cannot I go to you?"

Her hard, strained tones broke into a sobbing wail, and sinking upon her knees, she covered her face with her hands, bowed and broken, the very personification of woe.

Pale, with pain and anxiety deeply lining his face, Barry Carlsworth stood beside the woman, tightly folding his arms as though it was a hard struggle to keep from catching and pressing her to his bosom. He waited until her hysterical sobs grew less violent, then he spoke, his voice grave and earnest.

"No, I have not forgotten, Adola. I remember that Oren Bohee was my best, truest friend; that he loved me as a brother, even as I loved him. I have forgotten nothing."

"And done nothing, why don't you add?" she cried, hastily springing to her feet, dashing the tears from her eyes in another of those swift, complete changes which had marked her conduct

ever since the assassination of the man she loved so passionately.

"What do you mean, Adola?"

"What I say! Three months ago Oren Bohee was living. You were his daily companion. You swore that he was your brother and your second self—that he was dearer to you than if the ties of friendship were really those of blood!"

"And saying so, I spoke only the gospel truth," gravely uttered the young ranchero. "If he were here, Oren would tell you the same. He fully appreciated the sacrifice I made, if you do not, Adola."

There was a thinly veiled meaning in his tones that brought a faint tinge of color to her cheeks, but in no other way did Adola Fee notice it, and her voice was sharp and hard as ever when she made reply:

"Yet he fills a bloody grave, and you have done nothing to avenge his death! More—you have had his ruthless assassin fairly within reach of your hand, and he laughs you to scorn. Better an open enemy than such a pretended friend!"

They were hard and bitter words, especially hard to bear when coming from the lips of a woman one loves to desperation. Barry Carlsworth turned very pale, and his strong frame trembled with stronger emotion. Adola saw this, and once more she changed, abruptly, completely, her hands clasping upon his arm, the hard light softening in her eyes as she murmured:

"Forgive me, Barry; I did not mean to say that. Sometimes I fear my brain is failing me. I catch myself saying such hard and bitter things—doing such wild and unreasoning deeds! Yet, what wonder? Think of what I have endured since that frightful day!"

Loving her as he did, it was hard for Barry Carlsworth to listen to her broken tones, to look down upon her pale, care-lined face, now dampened with hot, bitter tears, and still refrain from catching her to his breast, still hold under control his long-pent-up passions.

"I do think of it, little one, and my heart bleeds for you as often. I know what you have lost, and knowing this, I do not wonder that bitter words should occasionally pass your lips. But when you accuse me of forgetting my duty to Oren Bohee, then you wrong as true and sincere a friend as ever woman had in this world, Adola."

"Then I ask you to prove your words, Barry Carlsworth," she said, slowly, growing hard once more, releasing his arm and standing before him, her blazing eyes fixed upon his face. "I ask you to aid me in hunting his assassin to the gallows!"

"You mean this man they call Masked Mark, Adola?"

"Yes!"

"You are wrong, altogether wrong, Adola," he added, firmly, his voice composed and resolute. "That man is a detective, sent to Rackabout Range by the governor to ferret out the gang of thieves and counterfeiters who have their head-quarters somewhere in this region."

"So he claims, but what proof has he to back up his word? Who has questioned him? Who has seen his commission?"

Barry Carlsworth hesitated for a brief space, his eyes glancing toward his horse, which just then struggled to its feet, staggering a little, but apparently rapidly recovering from the numbing effects of that adroitly planted bullet.

"Besides, that man did not make his appearance in these parts until long after the death of poor Oren, consequently he could have had no part in that horrible deed."

Adola laughed hardly, incredulously.

"You mean he did not appear as Masked Mark until after that date. Who can swear who the demon really is? Who has ever seen his bare face, or heard his undisguised voice? Not one in all Rackabout Range, to my knowledge! And if I had not seen you both at the same time, I could not have taken oath that you were not Masked Mark!"

"Adola!"

"Is it not the truth? Can you swear to his identity?"

Barry Carlsworth slowly shook his head, the troubled look deepening upon his face and in his dark eyes.

"Then I say again that he is the ruthless demon who laid my Oren low in death! I accuse him of the dastardly crime! I swear to hunt him down to a justly merited doom!" the woman cried, all her wild, fiery passions again bursting forth.

"What makes you think that, Adola? What proof have you?"

The faint, distant neigh of a horse came to their ears, and with a sharp cry, Adola Fee turned in that direction, only to have her view cut off by the timber island. With bent head she listened. Again the sound came floating over the prairie, and she sprung toward the motte, crying:

"It is Silverheels!"

Barry Carlsworth followed her, then led the way through the undergrowth, clearing a passage for the woman he loved so passionately, so hopelessly. And when they passed through the motte, they both beheld a black horse coming

toward them, its head close to the grass, as though it were following a certain trail by scent.

"It is Silverheels—alive and well!" cried Adola, recognizing her good steed which, until then, she had believed dead on the prairie, with the lead of Masked Mark buried deep in its brain.

She raised her voice and uttered a clear, ringing cry. The black horse flung up its head quickly. She stepped out into full view, waving one hand, and with a loud, glad neigh, the noble creature galloped swiftly up to her side, only halting when its velvety muzzle was touching her cheek, her arms wrapped about its curving neck.

"Gallant Silverheels!" she said, touching its lips with her own. "It was not your fault, but if you had not fallen, that demon could never have escaped me! And we will yet bring him to the bar of justice to answer for his atrocious crime—you and I, old fellow!"

A slight frown swept over the face of the young ranchero of Rackabout Range as he listened, and there was a trace of impatience in his voice as he uttered:

"You will persist in believing him guilty, then, Adola, despite all I have said?"

"And in which you are perfectly sincere, I have no doubt, Barry; but all the same, you are wrong and I am right. The demon who calls himself Masked Mark—who pretends to be a detective, hunting down offenders against the law—is really worse than the men he denounces, ten thousand times over!"

"I cannot believe it, Adola," he said, doggedly.

"Out of his own lips I can condemn him!"

"What do you mean by that?" was the swift ejaculation, as he stared into her hard, resolute countenance with undisguised amazement.

"Assist me to mount, and I will tell you, Barry," was her calmer reply.

He lowered his curved palm for her foot, and easily swung her into the saddle. She gathered up the reins and moved at a walk around the edge of the timber island. He accompanied her in silence, his dark eyes vainly trying to read her countenance, but it was like a mask of wax.

"Mount, if your horse is recovered sufficiently, Barry," she said, as they rounded the little island of timber. "If not capable of bearing your weight, lead him alongside, and I will explain my words of a bit ago."

The young ranchero moved his horse a few paces, watching its actions closely. It appeared to have fully recovered from its hurts, though the blood was still slowly trickling down its glossy neck.

"He's all right, I reckon, though he might not answer for a fast or long race," he said, as he swung himself into the saddle and moved to her side.

"Neither of which he is likely to be called upon to undergo, just now. Masked Mark is fairly beyond our reach, for the present, and he is the only game near here worth a chase," was the short, bitter retort.

For some little distance they rode together in silence, Barry Carlsworth watching her pale face, her dark eyes bent on the trail of the horse of Masked Mark. At length he ventured:

"Well, Adola?"

She turned upon him, her eyes keen, penetrating, seeming to wish to read his most secret thoughts. He met her gaze frankly, openly, and then she spoke again:

"Why am I so positive that the wretch who calls himself Masked Mark is the real assassin of Oren Bohee? Listen, and when I have told you all, defend the villain further, if you can!"

"Last night was one of the many nights full of misery and sleeplessness that I have passed since that frightful day when I saw him—dead, murdered! I could not sleep, and half-wild, I rose and stole noiselessly out of the house, thinking that perhaps the fresh night air might quiet my poor brain."

"I entered the grove lying near the house, and there I must have fallen into a half-sleep, or stupor. How long it lasted I cannot say, for when I was roused up, I took no note of either time or place, for I heard human voices near me."

"Almost the first words I heard held me spell-bound, and seemed to turn my blood to ice in my veins. One of the voices pronounced the name of Oren Bohee, and then I distinctly heard it add:

"That was a neat job, but this shall prove even neater. Alva Bohee is growing a little too fresh, and the sooner he is laid beside his brother in a bloody grave, the safer for us all. You fetch him up to the rack, and I'll see that he gets his fodder!"

"I tried to spring to my feet, but was unable to move. I fancied the voice was not wholly strange to me, but in vain I tried to place it distinctly. And even as I tried, there came another voice, muffled and indistinct, though I managed to make out every word it uttered. I can repeat them without a miss."

"Do this part of the work as well as you did the other, Masked Mark, and then you can disappear from mortal view as soon and as wholly as you please. They are the only ones we need fear just at this time, I believe."

"There was a hard, ugly laugh that chilled my blood anew, and then the first voice spoke again, saying:

"Never you borrow trouble on my account, boss. I'll do the work up in brilliant style, if you only take care that no hot-head jumps me in the rear. I have a good reason of my own for putting the young dandy out of the way, and if only for that, I'll not fail you this bout."

"I could not make out all of the answer made by the other man, and I was unable to change my position to get any nearer them. But I had heard enough to tell me who was the murderer of poor Oren, and then I swore again that I would never rest until I had avenged his death!

"A few moments later I heard them coming through the grove, and then they passed across a narrow strip of moonlight, and I saw them distinctly—or rather, I saw one as clearly as I see you now, Barry Carlsworth! And his face was covered with a mask—it was Masked Mark, I can take my oath!"

CHAPTER VIII.

BRAG IS A GOOD DOG, BUT—

WHEN Dike Roberts spoke to her in that tone of voice, and with that stern, reddish glow in his small dark eyes, Jessie knew that argument would be folly, and disobedience worse. She was the only living being toward whom the grim old squatter ever turned a genial side or showed aught of tenderness and love, but even with her he could be harsh and even dangerous.

She saw that he was in one of those moods now, and though she feared for the young man in whose company she left him, she dared not linger after that stern command. With that one imploring, warning look toward her lover, the border-girl turned and hastened up the steep slope.

She cast a backward glance as she gained the level, but those hard, uncompromising eyes were still watching her, and she was afraid to risk his further anger.

"Anyhow, dad won't find him nigh so soft and finicky as he seems to think for," she murmured, a soft glow tinging her smooth cheeks. "There's the making of a man, fit for a throne, in the one the boys call the Parson, and somebody's going to get burnt fingers if they don't look a little out—sure!"

A great change had come over the squatter's daughter, on that bright day. Until then, though she knew deep down in her own heart that she was beginning to think too often and too tenderly of Alva Bohee for her own comfort of mind, when the wide difference in their life-positions were taken into consideration, her growing love had been kept under control by a certain feeling of mingled pity and contempt for this dainty darling of good fortune. Like the great majority of the Rackabout Range people, she thought him better suited for a weak-nerved woman than a man, with all that name implies in such a turbulent community.

Time and again she told herself that it was a great pity he had ever come to that wild section; that it would be wise in him to dispose of his property, no matter at what sacrifice, and hasten back to the grade of society which he was best fitted by education and nature to ornament. He could never amount to aught on the Rackabout Range. Though his very meekness and dainty ways would protect him from trouble for a time, the day would come when he would be called upon to perform the duty of a man, and then he would suffer doubly for his long immunity. Some wild and woolly long-horn of the range would take him in out of the wet, and the Parson would soon become no more than a vague tradition among men.

This was what Jessie had thought more than once during the past few weeks, but that short hour on the flat rock in the middle of the river had wrought a transformation as great as it was delightful to the high-spirited little girl.

The one whom she had learned to love, despite her own better judgment, was, after all, a man in the truest sense of that word, well able to take care of himself, even among the best men of Rackabout Range.

Her brain busy with such reflections as these, Jessie hastened away from the river over the same trail as that followed by Dike Roberts and Alva Bohee not many minutes later.

She was not nearly so wide awake and on the alert as usual, thanks to her joyous thoughts, else she might have avoided the meeting which occurred just before she reached the little log cabin nestling beneath the frowning black rocks.

"Whither so fast, my little maid?" cried a clear, not unpleasant voice, but which brought a frown to her face even before she glanced up to see two horsemen barring the narrow path, at this point passing between two high, sloping rocks.

"About my own business, if you have sense and decency enough to get out of my way, Colonel Victor Vanderlyn!" Jessie snapped, in tones sharp and vinegarish enough to set her teeth on edge.

"A dainty slap in the face for you, colonel! Go to the foot of the class, and stay there until

the sun shines again!" cried the other rider, in a coarser, less agreeable tone, following the jeering speech with a loud, boisterous laugh.

"For the dunce-block is already occupied by one even more worthy the position," and Jessie nodded defiantly, mockingly toward the second speaker.

The man called Colonel Vanderlyn smiled as he said:

"Any position under so fair and witty a school-mistress is an honor of which the wisest of men might well be proud."

"Say, rather, Diana just from the bath!" the younger rider added, showing his teeth a little, his full face growing a shade or two redder under her undisguised dislike and scorn. "What under the sun have you been up to now, little girl? Not trying to commit suicide because so long a time has elapsed since I called upon you?"

"If I thought that would insure your eternal absence from my sight, Demas Fee, I'd commit suicide quicker than scat! But the preachers call self-destruction a sin, and as you have a seat already reserved for you down below, where all prime sinners go, I'd rather live and trust to my wits to keep out of evil company—to name no names, my lord!"

"Better drop it as too warm for your constitution, Demas, my lad," laughed the colonel, apparently highly enjoying the discomfiture of his grosser companion. "The dainty little craft carries too many guns for you, and she sends her shots right where they'll do the most good, too!"

"By preacher, you mean the Parson, I reckon?" sneered the angry youth, paying no attention to the laughing advice of his cooler-headed companion.

The shot told, and her cheeks flushed vividly. She snapped off the top of a shrub growing beside the path, and made it whistle sharply almost in the eyes of the spirited horses. They snorted and leaped back and aside, the sudden movement almost unseating Demas Fee.

Jessie laughed mockingly as she sprung through the vacated space, then paused long enough to fling at them:

"Take a lesson in common politeness from the four-legged brutes, is my advice to you. They, at least, know how to take a hint, while you—"

"Humbly beg your pardon for permitting our wish to enjoy your charming society a few moments longer, to drive your request entirely out of sight and mind," adroitly interposed Colonel Vanderlyn, doffing his slouch hat and bowing low.

"If sound was all, what a tremendous thunder-storm you might manufacture, all by your lonesome self, my worthy colonel of—the horse marines?" laughed the audacious girl.

"The Little Queen's Own, rather," smiled Vanderlyn, using the title which he had more than once heard Dike Roberts give his daughter.

Jessie made up a little mouth, and was turning away when Vanderlyn hastily added:

"By the way, when will your father be home, Jessie?"

"When he gets back," she snapped, without turning her head or deigning to give a more satisfactory answer, running lightly on to the little log cabin, entering and slamming the door emphatically behind her.

"A rare little spitfire, sure enough!" muttered Vanderlyn as he watched her, pulling vexedly at his long, drooping mustaches. "Not a very promising lookout for you, Demas!"

"I'll break her in, or break her neck!" the younger man grated, savagely.

He looked quite capable of putting his threat into execution, so far as mere will went, though he was not what one could call an ugly or disagreeable-looking person.

Tall, muscular, well built, dressed after the free-and-easy style of the stock-growing regions, armed to the teeth with pistols and knife, a repeating Winchester hanging to his saddle, kept in place by passing beneath one sinewy thigh, Demas Fee was a good specimen of the higher class of ranchers.

He was dark almost as an Italian, his full, round face beginning to show signs of dissipation, of late hours and hard drinking, if no worse excesses. There was a slightly bloated look about his cheeks and puffy swellings beneath his small, jetty-black eyes. His nose was losing its original fine, clean-cut appearance, and bidding fair to some day produce a fine crop of rum-blossoms, unless he should speedily mend his ways.

Apart from these particulars, Demas Fee was really a handsome young fellow, bearing a strong family resemblance to his sister, Adola.

Colonel Victor Vanderlyn was an even more striking-looking personage, and in his every movement he betrayed the old soldier, showing that his title was not altogether honorary.

He was far above the average height of man, and could look over the crown of men who measured an even six feet in altitude; yet his person was so justly proportioned in every respect that his extreme height was only noticed when a comparison was made with another of known height.

He had evidently passed the middle mile-post of life, for there were many silver lines among the nut-brown of his hair, which he wore close-

ly clipped, after a military rather than stockman fashion. His upper lip supported a pair of mustaches of unusual dimensions, curving over each side of his mouth and descending almost to his shoulders, before curving slightly upward at the ends.

His face was large, his features strong and slightly irregular, but on the whole he was what would be termed a handsome man, even by good judges.

His dress also smacked a little of the camp in its cut and color, being navy blue, and fitting his superb figure snugly. On his head he wore a black felt hat of the style so popular among cavalry officers of the civil war, surrounded by a double cord and acorn-shaped tassels.

Colonel Vanderlyn laughed softly at the fierce outburst on the part of his companion, seeming to experience a lazy delight in spurring his evil passions, for he added:

"Luckily the Parson did not hear that speech, my lad."

"What's he got to do with it, I'd like to know?"

"Well, I wouldn't like to say for certain, but you saw how the little lady broke out when you sneered at him, a bit ago. The gentle shepherd comes this way mighty frequently, they say, and it can hardly be to exercise his good horse, if he is one-half as careful of his delicate neck as the lads give him credit for. If not, why not the dainty little piece yonder? Who knows? The Parson may have a word or two to say before you begin that breaking-in process, Demas!"

"If I thought so!" grated the young ranchero.

"What is there so unlikely about it? The parsons are famous about running after the women, they say, and—"

"I'll take the critter across my knee and spank him until his nose bleeds, the first time I catch him skulking about this place!"

"I don't know, Demas," with a slow shake of his soldierly head as they moved leisurely toward the cabin. "Still water runs deep, and there may be a veritable volcano lying beneath that placid exterior. As a friend and well-wisher, I wouldn't advise you to pick up the Parson for an oyster on the half-shell, all ready to be swallowed without grace, for it is barely possible he may turn out a devil-fish in disguise."

"That milk-and-water critter?" and the black-mustached lips curled with undisguised contempt. "If the whole world was low-down enough to hold a dozen such, and you could stand them all in a row before me, I'd ask no better fun than to fit the whole outfit for the hospital, free of charge!"

Colonel Vanderlyn made no reply, for he saw that his companion was growing dangerously hot, and he had no desire to engage in a dispute with him. They rode up to the little log cabin and dismounting, hitched their animals to a long pole supported by a four-foot post at either end, planted a few yards to the right of the house. The ground about was trampled hard, and the pole itself was denuded of bark and bore the marks of horses' teeth, plainly indicating the purpose for which it had been erected.

A glance at the cabin showed them the door still closed, and the additional fact that the latch-string had been drawn in, contrary to the usual custom. A quiet, amused smile curled the colonel's mustaches, but Demas Fee muttered an ugly oath as he noted this fact.

"Not the most assuring lead for a lover who came prepared to conquer without losing a trick," uttered the colonel, glancing in the direction of the river. "The little lady is in one of her tantrums to-day, Demas, and I reckon you'd make money by waiting for a brighter prospect."

"I'll drive those tantrums out of her, or break her neck, when she's under my thumb—mind that, now!" was the surly reply.

"Will she ever get there? I begin to doubt it, my lad," the colonel added, seriously. "I think you have given her too wide a range, and that she's found pasture which she thinks will agree with her better than any you can furnish."

"What do you mean by that?" growled Demas, though his keen-eyed companion could see that the hint had struck him hard, from the manner in which he flinched.

"You have been too sure of your own powers. You have let the girl have her head too long. But worse than that, you have let another man have too free run of your range."

"He ain't a man—if you mean that cussed Parson!"

"Ask Jes' what she thinks about it," laughed Vanderlyn.

"The Parson? She wouldn't look at him twice, if it wasn't for the sport she makes out of the critter! Why, he ain't no more than the shadow of a man, and—"

Colonel Vanderlyn cut him short with a cold laugh, then pointed along the path by which they had gained the house.

"A pretty substantial shadow, don't you think?"

An ugly, dangerous snarl broke from the lips of the young ranchero as he followed the direction of the extended hand, to catch a glimpse of Dike Roberts and Alva Bohee coming toward the cabin. He hesitated for a single instant, then sprung to the side of his horse, snatching

the repeating rifle from the slings that held it to the saddle.

"Careful, you!" grated Vanderlyn, as he sprung forward and caught his companion by the arm with a giant's grip. "No murder—I won't stand by and see *that* done, you understand?"

With a swift, hard laugh Demas Fee glanced over his shoulder, his eyes ablaze, his face deeply flushed, his voice reckless.

"Keep inside your clothes, old man! I'll agree not to break skin, and if the Parson suffers, it will be from his own imagination. I give my word—you know what that means."

Colonel Vanderlyn removed his hand, shrugged his shoulders as he stepped back, saying:

"I wash my hands of the matter, so don't call to me if you feel the rope growing uncomfortably tight about your neck in consequence, young fellow!"

"I'm only going to warn him off my claim. See the critter buck when he hears the lead-music!"

With an aim as steady as it was rapid, Demas Fee sent his bullet on its mission, without the slightest misgiving as to the result, though nearly two hundred yards separated him from his target, and the best of marksmen might well have shown a little nervousness under the circumstances. And as they saw Alva Bohee start and snatch off his silk hat, the two men broke into a loud laugh that still rent the air when the door behind them was flung open and Jessie Roberts rushed forth in wild excitement.

With a strength that did not seem possible in one of her slight frame, she caught the rifle and wrested it from the grasp of the startled rowdy, leaping back and covering his heart with the muzzle as she cried, sharply:

"You dastardly cur! If you have harmed even one hair of his head, I'll riddle your vile heart with your own gun!"

Colonel Vanderlyn prudently fell back a pace or two, one hand mechanically smoothing his mustache as he watched the little drama, a growing smile in his cool, keen eyes.

Dike Roberts uttered a warning shout as he hastened forward, followed closely by Alva Bohee, who still held the perforated hat in his hand.

Jessie paid no attention to his cry, but kept Demas Fee covered with his own rifle, following his slightest motion as he flinched, more from her blazing eyes than the weapon.

Dike Roberts caught the rifle in his strong hand and threw up the muzzle, then twisting the weapon from the hand of his daughter as he sternly cried:

"In the house with ye, Jes', an' stay thar ontel you kin larn to behave yourself—you hear me whisper, gal?"

Jessie fell back, with a quick glance toward Alva Bohee, who slightly moved his head in token that he was unhurt. The hard, strained look left her eyes, and a little color came into her cheeks at this silent assurance. She retreated to the house, but the door remained open, and Jessie kept close watch over all that occurred outside.

"Now fer you, Demas Fee," added Dike Roberts, turning upon the reckless young ranchero with a hard scowl that was flatly contradicted by the malicious twinkle in his small dark eyes. "What sot you to playin' the durned fool, shootin' at a man—"

"You don't call a critter put up like *him*, a man, do ye, Daddy Dike?" interposed the rough, his brows arching in mock surprise. "Thar's the clothes which a man, ef he was mighty hard pushed, mought w'ar to kiver his nakedness, but the fillin' that holds 'em up ain't made o' the stuff that passes fer a man on the Rackabout Range—not by a jug full!"

Dike Roberts chuckled, Colonel Vanderlyn smiled, tugging at his huge mustaches as he keenly eyed the Parson. Demas Fee stood with his arms akimbo, his hat pushed far back on his head, insolence in his eyes and every line of his bloated face as he confronted Alva Bohee. The latter was pale as death, but there was a cold, steel-like glitter in his blue eyes that would have warned a wise man of danger as he held up his hat before the rowdy, touchin' gone of the bullet-holes with the tip of his finger as he asked:

"This is your work, I believe, Mr. Fee?"

"Did I say it wasn't, critter?" uttered the young rough, evidently finding a certain degree of pleasure in contrasting his tones and pronunciation with the smooth, precise speech of his rival in love. "Hope it didn't skeer you too pesky bad, fer ye hain't no growth to lose, ef you don't want al'ays to be the little runt I see afore me jes' now. Better squat down ontel the stiffenin' comes back to your knee-joints, Parson!"

"You admit that the shot was yours, then?"

"Sart'in I do," was the prompt reply, though the rowdy was clearly puzzled to see what the Parson was driving at.

"One more question, please. Did you shoot at me?"

"Would you be able to ax that question ef I hed? Not much, you pore little runt! No sir; I shot at your hat."

Alva Bohee placed the perforated hat upon his head, a cold smile playing about his thin lips

as he faced the rough, his voice smooth and even, but cutting like the lash of a whip.

"I thought not. A blustering, bragging bully of your miserable caliber would hardly dare take aim at a man, unless so drunk that his mushy brains were wholly unable to warn him of danger. You are not quite drunk, and so could see that it was safer to shoot at a hat than at a man."

Demas Fee was totally taken aback at this sharp speech from one whom he had always set down as a nerveless excuse for a man, and before he could collect his scattered wits, Alva Bohee scored him again:

"Ever since I came to Rackabout Range, you have made it a point to sneer at and cast slurs upon me, because I went about my business and behaved myself—a disagreeable contrast to your style of enjoying life. You thought mean innocent fresh, a craven-hearted tenderfoot, because I dressed like a gentleman, because I kept myself clean and neat, because I went about the country unarmed, depending upon my honesty and squareness to keep me from being assailed. You sneered at me because I did not make a hog of myself after your own disgusting fashion; because I did not smell like a walking distillery, nor grunt in your peculiar rowdyish style. If I did not carry an arsenal about with me; if I did not drink myself blind drunk every time I met a neighbor; if I failed to wallow in the mud and utter vile oaths at every breath; you had no use for me! I was a Parson! I was unfit for the company of men! And I thank the Lord that you spoke the simple truth, taking manhood and mankind from your stand-point!"

Several times during this swift sermon, Demas Fee made as though he would cut in, but each time his parted lips would close in mechanical obedience to the imperious wave of the kid-gloved hand. But when Alva Bohee paused, the maddened rowdy uttered a short, harsh laugh as he strode to the side of his horse, snatching from the saddle-bow a heavy quirt. He drew the hard-braided lash through his fingers as he turned toward the Parson, and there was a tigerish glitter in his black eyes as he snarled:

"You talk—I act! Down onto your marrow-bones, Parson, an' pray fer your sweet life! Strike up the music!"

He sprung forward and swung the lash toward his rival—only to have it dexterously caught by the gloved hand and jerked so sharply that he staggered forward within reach of the Parson, whose hands shot out, one following the other, slapping the bully's face so smartly that they sounded like twin pistol-shots!

CHAPTER IX.

A PRICE ON MASKED MARK'S HEAD.

As she uttered those words denouncing Masked Mark, Adola Fee turned in her saddle and gazed fixedly into the face of her companion. What she saw there caused her black eyes to open widely and her pulse to leap with double rapidity.

The young man's face was pale as that of a corpse, and there was a wild, scared look in his eyes, not unlike that which a man might show on unexpectedly finding himself confronted with a great and wholly unprovided-for peril.

It was a look so strange and unaccountable that, for the first time in her life, Adola Fee caught herself doubting the strict integrity of her friend. What was Masked Mark to him? Could it be possible that there was any connection between them? That Barry Carlsworth was—

She scarce knew what to think, her brain was in such a bewildering whirl, and a gasp of relief broke from her lips as the young ranchero hastily uttered:

"Heaven be thanked, Adola, that they failed to discover you, else there might have been another frightful tragedy—another red mystery for us to solve!"

How simple the solution! Adola almost felt like laughing aloud as Barry Carlsworth drove away those doubts by his huskily-uttered words. She knew how dearly he loved her—how long and devotedly he had loved her, even to yielding all claims in favor of the man whom he called his heart-brother. It was fear for her safety that had paled his cheek and put that wild look into his eyes.

"Better for him if he had found me—if he had left me there beneath the trees with knife or bullet-hole through my heart!" she cried, with a return of her former wild, half-crazy fierceness, mixed with gloom. "Better for him, for his secret would have been his own yet a little longer; better for me, for in the grave I could at least find rest!"

"But not for your friends, Adola," said Barry, his voice strongly affected as he bent over in the saddle and placed one hand upon her arm, hoping to quiet her by the gentle touch. "You must think of them. You must live for their sakes, even though life looks so black and dreary with the light of his dear face shut out by the grave."

"For vengeance, too!" she muttered, her hands clenching tightly, her jetty eyes glowing afresh. "That, more than all else. For vengeance on the vile assassin I would gladly give my life—my soul, even!"

Barry Carlsworth shivered and the pained light deepened in his eyes as he listened. Her utterly reckless tone and bitter, hopeless manner cut him to the very heart.

They rode on in silence after that, Adola keeping her dark eyes bent on the prairie where she could trace the recent trail left by the man with the hidden face. Barry Carlsworth did not appear to notice this. His whole attention was given to the woman whom he loved, hopelessly though he felt that adoration was bestowed.

There was a leaf in the history of these young people that few, if any, living on Rackabout Range had ever read.

Prominent among those owning stock ranches in that section, were Oren Bohee, Barry Carlsworth and Frank Dymock. All were young and energetic men, possessing good qualifications for the business they had selected, enterprising and go-ahead far beyond the average. They were old acquaintances and bosom friends, having come to Rackabout Range together several years before the date of this story.

Barry Carlsworth was the pioneer, exploring the Northwest for a promising opening, and though all agreed that the prospects were admirable, it is more than likely that his decision was hastened if not altogether owing to the dark eyes and charming face of Adola Fee, at the house of whose parent he spent several days while riding over the country inspecting the land.

Be that as it may, Barry Carlsworth fell deeply in love with the young lady before they had been long located on Rackabout Range, though his grave manner and natural reserve made her slow to even suspect such a thing.

Oren Bohee was of a different nature, frank, jolly, open as day, unable to hide his preferences even had he made the attempt, and Barry Carlsworth was the very friend he selected to confide in when he discovered how hard the black eyes of Adola had hit his heart. And Barry listened in silence, his face grave, showing no signs of the bitter pain which each sentence caused him; listened, and as their hands met in a warm grasp, wished Oren Bohee good luck in his wooing!

He kept his secret then, but not long afterward he unconsciously betrayed his real emotions to the astonished and deeply pained Bohee, tossing on a troubled couch, and talking thickly in his sleep. Not many words did Oren Bohee catch, but they were sufficient to put him on the right trail, and when the morning came, he and Barry Carlsworth had a long talk.

When it was over, Barry rode away to his own ranch, but Oren instead sought out Adola Fee. Gravely, in tones and manner very unlike his usual self, he requested her to take a short ride with him. Startled, troubled by his unusual manner, fearing she scarcely knew what, Adola consented.

She knew that, for some reason, neither her father nor her brother liked Oren Bohee. More than once they had bidden her discourage his visits to the house, unless she wished him to be openly insulted by one or the other. As often she had declined, in tones that bade them beware how they pressed her hard. She had the "Fee temper," and they knew there would be trouble were it once fairly aroused.

Fearing that some trouble had arisen between Oren and one of her relatives, Adola prepared for the ride; but ere they had covered a mile of the prairie she discovered her mistake.

Oren Bohee plainly laid bare the discovery he had made the night before, saying nothing of his own love, but setting forth that of his "heart-brother" in words as eloquent as Barry Carlsworth could have done himself. He told all, even to the reason why Barry had not spoken for himself, though carefully concealing the name of the one whom he believed to have won the love of Adola.

She listened, at first shocked and almost stunned, then in cold silence until his plea was finished. She coldly thanked him for the trouble he had taken, and praised his generosity, his friendship; she admitted that Barry Carlsworth was all he pictured him, true-hearted, honest, a gentleman in word, deed and action, and a man well fitted to make a woman supremely happy through life—provided that woman loved him as he did her.

It was difficult for even Oren Bohee to get her to say more, but ere that ride was ended, he learned enough to know that Barry Carlsworth had not even the ghost of a chance to win either her heart or her hand.

Despite his friendship, Oren Bohee felt his heart growing lighter as this truth dawned upon him, but he sternly checked the thoughts that almost made his brain whirl, and the young couple parted without coming to any further understanding.

The same evening Barry Carlsworth called at the Fee house, and before he took his departure Adola knew that Oren Bohee loved her sincerely, passionately. It was a curious coincidence, showing how true and perfect was the love which existed between the two men. Just as Oren had pleaded that day, so Barry pleaded that night, setting forth the perfections of his heart-brother with a grave earnestness that showed his sincerity.

One naturally suspicious might have suspected collusion between the two men, but Adola felt that each one was honest and perfectly sincere in his action. There was truth in every tone, in every look.

She was silent for a long time after Barry Carlsworth ended his plea, thinking, considering what to reply. Then, acting on the impulse of the moment, she told him all that had happened that day, only reserving her final answer to Bohee.

For a brief space Barry Carlsworth was like one stunned. He seemed unable to utter a word, for, until that instant, he had believed his love was even unsuspected by another. But then he rose equal to the occasion, and gave the last proof of his brotherly affection.

He admitted that it all was true—that he loved her as he never thought to love a woman—that he had dreamed of having her for a life companion, and finding the dream a very sweet one indeed! But that was before he knew his heart-brother had placed his hopes on the same treasure. He was the oldest, the strongest, the best able to bear a heavy cross; Oren was by far the most suitable for her, and most likely to make her married life blessed.

"While Oren lives, or until he marries another, if you refuse him, my love is dead and buried," he said, gravely. "Even if I knew you loved me as a true woman should love the man intended by nature for her husband, I would turn away from even that glimpse of heaven, rather than be the cause of giving him pain. He is my heart-brother—the better part of myself. Love him if you can, Adola. In making him blessed, you will make me happy, also."

Barry Carlsworth departed, without having learned for certain that Adola loved Oren, though he believed she did. For several days the trio kept apart, but then Oren, wholly unsuspecting the truth, again visited Adola and begged her to take another ride over the prairie with him.

Secretly trembling and fearful, believing that Barry Carlsworth had told him all, Adola consented. Outwardly she was calm and gracious, even gay, and when Oren asked her if she had not repented of her former decision, her high spirit, aided by what Barry had told her, gave her courage to tell how nobly that young man had behaved.

She mentioned no names save his; she deftly concealed all that could have brought a blush to her cheek, but she made his noble renunciation perfectly clear before she paused. And then—well, Oren Bohee was but human, and he loved her dearly. He was of less stern stuff than his heart-brother, and when he knew that Barry had abandoned all hope of winning this glorious woman, his love burst forth and carried all before it.

Strange as it may seem, to those who cannot comprehend the more than fraternal love which existed between the two men, Barry Carlsworth seemed almost as delighted and happy as the successful suitor when the engagement was made known to him and to her relatives. And if it was not perfectly sincere, then he proved himself a superb actor.

On the contrary, both Jehudi and Demas Fee, her brother and her father, strongly opposed the match, swearing that they would never permit the wedding to be consummated. This at first, but when they saw how stubborn and defiant Adola could be where her love was concerned, they gradually cooled down, though they were no more than coldly polite to Oren Bohee.

There was still another who bitterly opposed the match—Colonel Victor Vanderlyn. He had long sought to gain the love of Adola Fee for himself, persisting in his suit even after a second and third rebuff. And when he learned of her engagement he went off on a "tear," muttering many fierce threats against the successful rival while under the influence of his cups.

Then the day drew near which was to unite the loving pair—to dawn on a bloody, ghastly corpse! Oren Bohee, riding home from his usual visit to his bride-elect, was foully murdered!

Suspicion naturally turned upon Colonel Vanderlyn, when people recalled the fierce threats he had uttered against the dead man; but he plainly proved his innocence. That day and night he had been miles away, and there were a dozen good, respectable men who could swear to an alibi.

The more the affair was investigated, the deeper proved the mystery, until all save a few of those most deeply interested gave it as their opinion that the whole truth would never be known until the Day of Judgment.

Word was sent to Alva Bohee, as the natural heir to his brother's property, and in due time he made his appearance in Rackabout Range society. He took charge of the ranch, saw that Oren's grave was supplied with a monument and neat fence, then apparently settled down with the conviction that his entire duty had been performed. If he was investigating the murder he gave no outward evidence of that fact.

It did not take the denizens of Rackabout Range long to make up their minds that they did not like the new-comer. He wore too fine clothes. He was too pale and effeminate-looking.

ing. He neither drank, smoked nor gambled, even so far as betting on a friendly horse-race or bull-fight. He kept to himself, and received all callers so coldly, so languidly, that they took their departure in utter disgust.

There were those who did not hesitate to say that, if he did not have a hand in the murder of his brother, Alva Bohee was not wearing himself to a shadow grieving over his taking-off. And of all Rackabout Range, he had but three friends who could or would say a word in his behalf—Jessie Roberts, Barry Carlsworth, and Frank Dymock.

Shortly after this, another new-comer aroused the curiosity of Rackabout Range, though after a somewhat different fashion. A strange horseman was seen at different times, mounted on a magnificent blood-bay steed; but who he was or whence he came, no one seemed able to state with any degree of certainty. No one could name him. No one could point out his head-quarters or say where he spent his sleeping hours. No one could, or would, admit having seen his face, or heard his voice. He was an enigma to all, and had not even a name until, one day some weeks before the opening of this story, a card was found posted on the door of a tavern or general store-house, of which more particular mention will be made in due time, known as "Stokeley's," containing a name and a title, nothing more.

That name and title read "MASKED MARK, the MOUNTED DETECTIVE."

The word spread all over the Range, with the rapidity of wildfire, and at once became the general subject of animated discussion. What did it mean? Why had Masked Mark, if his hand had indeed written those bold letters, posted the card there? Was it a taunt, or a defiance? Or was it a dark threat? If so, against whom?

Some believed he was seeking to solve the mystery which enveloped the murder. Others thought he was sent to Rackabout Range to ferret out the gang of cattle and horse-thieves who had recently been very busy in plying their evil arts, or else that those who were flooding the country with counterfeit money were suspected by the authorities of having a harboring place somewhere on the Range.

Thus matters stood at the date of this story.

"Now you know what I meant by saying that I could convict Masked Mark out of his own lips," abruptly uttered Adola Fee, as they rode slowly along the trail across the prairie. "I heard him say that he would send Alva Bohee to join his brother! And a minute later I distinctly saw his figure—his face I could not see, for it was covered with the mask he wore when he faced me back yonder, before you came up."

"Adola," hesitatingly uttered the young man, "you won't be angry with me if I speak plainly?"

"Have I so many friends left that I can afford lightly to throw away one so true and noble as you have proved, Barry? Say what you will—but don't attempt to defend that merciless demon!"

"You know how terribly you have suffered since—"

She impulsively raised her hand, her face convulsed, but he gravely persisted:

"I must say what I sincerely believe to be the truth, Adola, even at the risk of paining you. I do not doubt that you believe every word you have told me, but I still believe that you are mistaken—that you are wronging an innocent man."

"After all I heard and saw, only last night?" she cried.

"Or what you imagined you saw and heard," he replied, deliberately.

"You think I am crazy, then, like the rest?"

"I think your brain was disturbed just enough to make you fancy you saw and heard what you have detailed. I believe this, or else that you fell into a troubled sleep there in the grove, and dreamed it. If not, why were you unable to move, to cry out or to give the alarm?"

He saw her face grow still harder, and with a sigh he felt that he could not convince her against her will. Until another person was proven guilty of slaying Oren Bohee, she would continue to believe Masked Mark the blood-stained criminal.

"You are wasting words in vain, Barry," she said, coldly, hardly. "I was wide awake. I heard those words, and I saw the same lifelike mask that met my gaze to-day. I recognized in his voice the same voice that rung in my ears last night; and the dress, the shape, both were the very same!"

"Still, I believe you were mistaken."

"Why?" she asked, impetuously, gazing keenly into his face as she spoke. "What do you know of this mysterious being whom all call Masked Mark?"

"What you know—what all the people know; that there is such a man," was his quiet reply.

"Then why do you defend him so stubbornly, against the plain and positive evidence of my senses? Why do you declare him innocent, when I heard him as much as admit his guilt?"

"Because I believe another man killed our friend."

"Who? Whom do you suspect?" she uttered, breathlessly.

Barry Carlsworth slowly shook his head.

"Not that I doubt you, Adola, but I am not sure I am on the right trail, and the slightest indiscretion might foil all my plans. Some day soon, you shall know all; until then, I beg of you to let me keep my secret suspicions to myself."

"Get rid of them, Barry, if they point toward other than this Masked Mark!" she cried earnestly. "He is the criminal, and you will believe me when he stands beneath the gallows to which I have sworn to bring him!"

"Adola, you are a woman, and such thoughts, such work is wholly unsuited to you. I beg of you to leave it all in the hands of those who loved him and love you."

He ceased speaking before he had uttered all that rose to his tongue, for she leaned over in her saddle and caught him by the arm, her black eyes glowing vividly, her red lips parted with short, hurried breaths. Then she spoke, swiftly, with intense earnestness:

"Barry Carlsworth, was it the truth that Oren Bohee told me on that day before you called at my house and told me of his love? Was it true, that you loved me as a man loves his wife?"

His face turned paler than ever, but his voice was steady and his grave eyes met hers fairly as he made reply:

"It was true. I did love you, as man seldom loves in this world; but when I knew my heart-brother also loved you, I put my own feelings aside and wished him all success with you."

"And I loved him—loved him as I can never love again! My heart is buried in his grave, and it will never again beat with the fervor it did while he lived! You know that, Barry Carlsworth. But you know, too, that I would not lie to you, even to accomplish my vengeance on his vile assassin. You will believe me when I say that, next to him, you have ever had a place in my heart."

She extended one hand toward him. He took it, touched it to his lips reverently, then held it firmly in his strong palm as she continued:

"If I read your noble, manly nature aright, Barry, you have not killed that love. And I—listen, Barry Carlsworth!"

"What I have to give—my honor, respect, affection, with myself, I will give to you, when you ask for it, if you will avenge the cruel death of Oren Bohee!"

An intense, almost fierce light leaped into his eyes and flushed his face. His voice was hoarse and strained as he bent toward her and cried:

"You are in earnest, Adola? You are not playing with me?"

"As Heaven hears my words, I will make them good the day you bring his murderer to justice!" was the solemn reply.

"If mortal man can do it, it shall be done!" he cried, once more kissing her hand, then rising erect in his saddle.

"All others have failed me," she said, wearily, the intense fire vanishing like magic from eyes, voice and face. "I have appealed to my father and my brother in vain. Even his brother seems indifferent to his fate!"

"You shall never have that to say of me, Adola," he said, his words more impressive from their very quietness. "I have a double motive to urge me on, now, and I will neither falter nor fail—I swear it by my future hopes, my love, my queen!"

"Then there is your road!" and she pointed to the still distinct trail. "Follow that, and it will lead you to the vile assassin! Go—lose not a moment longer—follow him to his secret haunt and bring him with you, dead or alive!"

As she uttered these words, she spurred her good horse away at a sharp angle, riding toward her home. Barry Carlsworth gazed after her in silence for a space, then bent forward in his saddle, moving rapidly along the trail left by Masked Mark.

CHAPTER X.

THE PARSON GETS HIS BACK UP.

"WILL you look at that, now? Who said a man had to be as big as a mountain? The Parson forever!"

From her position close inside the cabin door, Jessie Roberts had closely watched the progress of events without, and as the two gloved hands left their finger-marks in red across the cheeks of the threatening bully, her new-born pride in the manhood of the one whom even she had considered a timid weakling, swept all before it, and springing outside the cabin, she uttered that enthusiastic speech, stinging Demas Fee more keenly even than the blows he received.

The quirt fell from his hand as he staggered back, reeling like a drunken man. Not from the force of the double blow, though the Parson had put plenty of emphasis behind them both, as though determined that there should be no room left for doubt as to his intentions. It was the totally unexpected that threw him off his balance; that and a fierce sense of shame that the woman whom he loved should be a witness to his shameful discomfiture, temporary though he resolved it should be, and terribly avenged.

A snarling curse hissed through his clenched

and grating teeth, and his right hand snatched a revolver from his hip.

Boldly the Parson confronted him, his voice filled with contempt as he drew his symmetrical figure erect, making no effort to escape the threatened shot by either advance or retreat, his gloved hands empty, his voice cool, his tones even as though he knew he bore a charmed life.

"Shoot, you bullying cur! And then go make your brags that you murdered an unarmed man!"

It was plucky, but very foolish conduct, for all that. Demas Fee was fairly beside himself with rage, and though under ordinary circumstances he would have scorned the idea of drawing on an unarmed man, such "chivalric" scruples were lost sight of now, and he meant sudden death when he tore his revolver from its scabbard.

Fortunately for Alva Bohce, there were others nigh who acted to much better purpose, else he surely would have filled a bloody grave, as well as the brother whom he had not yet avenged.

Jessie darted to where Dike Roberts stood leaning on the muzzle of the rifle which he had taken from her a few minutes before, and snatching it from his grasp, she covered its rightful owner, her voice ringing out clear and sharp:

"Drop that gun, Demas Fee, or I'll spoil the shape of your head with one of your own cartridges! Coward! to draw on an unarmed man!"

It may be doubted whether he heard or comprehended her indignant speech, so terribly was he angered by the blows he had received, and almost certainly there would have been a double tragedy had not Colonel Victor Vanderlyn promptly seconded her action by catching his comrade by the wrists, holding him powerless despite his desperate struggles.

Strong, muscular though he was, Demas Fee was powerless in the grasp of the big soldier, who shook the pistol from his hand and turned him around so that his back was toward his enemy, bending his head low and whispering swift words.

Dike Roberts was taken completely by surprise, and not until the crisis was past did he make a move. Then, with a sternly-lowering brow and something very like a muttered curse, he caught the rifle from the hands of the girl, pushing her toward the cabin as he growled:

"You want me to break your back, Jes? Seat with ye! Git into the house an' don't you dar' stick even the tip o' your nose out ag'in without leave, unless you want me to snap it right off. The idee! a gal like you comin' atwixt men, an' makin' a heap wuss bobbery with your durned nonsense! Git!"

"Give him a fair show, then. If I am only a girl, I'll not stand tamely by and see a friend murdered!" cried Jessie, as she reluctantly yielded to his greater strength.

"Who's doin' any murderin', you keardless critter? When a man hits another, he does it with his eyes open, an' ef he's bit off a bigger mouthful then he kin swaller, that's his own lookout. It's too late then to plead the baby-act."

"But not for his friends to see fair play."

"He's no fri'nd to you, nur you to him," was the surly reply, as Dike Roberts pushed her toward the cabin. "This is his last comin' to this place, unless he's got lives to spar', like a cat. Git in thar, an' ye want to stay put, this time!"

Alva Bohce said nothing during this bit of by-play, though his flushed cheeks and glowing eyes showed how strongly he was tempted to interfere. His heart thrilled within him at the generous defense made by the one whom he had learned to love so dearly, but he knew that any word or action from him just then would be worse than useless.

Still holding the rifle which had played so prominent a part in the little drama, Dike Roberts left Jessie at the threshold and walked slowly back to where Alva Bohce stood. His face was grave and stern, his voice anything but pleasant as he addressed the young man:

"I reckon you kin give a guess as to what must come o' them two slaps, young feller?"

"Had a gentleman received them, I could answer your question with more certainty," quietly replied the Parson. "What yonder foul-mouthed rowdy would like to make the outcome, his actions have made sufficiently clear, I should think."

"You slapped his wits clean crooked, I do reckon," and there was a covert look of wonder in his eyes as Dike Roberts glanced up and down the trim figure before him, as though he sought in vain to discover the muscle that enabled the Parson to handle his athletic rival so deftly, "or the kunnel couldn't 'a' got his gun away in time to save his bacon. As it is—you'd better shake foot mighty lively out o' this unless you're raa'ly hungry fer a wooden overcoat."

"Would you run, were you in my place, Mr. Roberts?" pointedly asked the young ranchero.

The weatherbeaten countenance flushed a little, and the old squatter actually seemed confused. Then he muttered:

"I wouldn't 'a' stuck into no sech game, on-

less I was all ready to see it through to the end; but you, Parson, ain't got even so much as a gun about your clothes!"

"So have I counted the cost, Mr. Roberts," quickly replied the young ranchero, his voice growing hard and cold, his blue eyes glowing steadily. "I have borne all that any one with a single spark of manhood in his composition could bear without becoming utterly disgraced. I had urgent reasons for showing so much outward humility; but there is a limit to all human endurance, and I have been crowded across that line. Ever since I came to Rackabout Range the people have taken particular pains to tread on my toes, doubtless believing 'the Parson' would not fight. I'm going to open their eyes, now, and as one of the chief among the bullies, I'll begin with Demas Fee, in any style he may prefer."

"Your head won't turn gray while you wait for the chance, anyhow!" muttered Roberts, as Colonel Victor Vanderlyn parted with his young companion and gravely approached the others.

With a degree of ceremony that seemed exaggerated, the ex-soldier lifted his hat and bowed to Alva Bohce, who as politely returned the salute. His tones were as grave as his face, when he spoke:

"This is a very unfortunate affair, Mr. Bohce, but as a gentleman by birth and breeding, of course you know that it is impossible for it to end without going further."

He paused, but the young ranchero simply bowed assent.

"When blows pass between gentlemen—"

Alva Bohce lifted one gloved hand with a gesture that caused the colonel to pause in surprise. And then, his tones, clear and cutting, smooth and even, yet raised sufficiently high for Jessie to catch them as she stood in the open door, and each syllable stinging Demas Fee like the stroke of a whiplash, the Parson spoke:

"If you limit the term gentlemen to yourself and me, Colonel Vanderlyn, I am willing to accept it and listen further; but if by it you mean to include that fellow with the finger-marked cheeks, you are both wasting your words and shooting very wide of the mark. Demas Fee is not a gentleman; never was nor ever will be a gentleman, if his treatment of a stranger be taken as the criterion. He has shown himself a foul-mouthed ruffian, a brutal bully, a cowardly cur. He has no claims to recognition at the hands of an honorable man. He would be too highly honored by a salute from the boot of a gentleman's lackey. He is too low—"

"Choke him off, or I'll riddle him like a sifter!" cried Fee, almost suffocating with rage, writhing as though actually under the excoriating lash.

"The gentleman you allude to is my friend, Mr. Bohce," stilly uttered the colonel, flushing warmly. "By insulting him, you insult me, since I have consented to act as his representative."

"That, of course would be a matter of regret to me," politely bowed Bohce, but showing no signs of uneasiness or fear at the implied threat.

"So far as I know, you have treated me as one gentleman should treat another. Still, when you make so palpable a mistake as to bring me a message from a half-drunken, wholly disreputable brute, and claim that it is from a man of honor, I must correct you, let the consequences be what they may."

"Then I am to understand that you refuse to give my friend satisfaction for the blows you dealt him, just now?" the colonel stilly demanded, emphasizing the word friend by way of showing his declining the estimate made by Bohce.

"Not a bit of it," was the swift reply, the red lips curling with scorn. "Since decency is at a discount on Rackabout Range, and a man is deemed a criminal for dressing and behaving himself as a gentleman should, I'll waive all other considerations and give even Demas Fee satisfaction when, how and where he pleases."

"Give him a gun and step aside, you!" grated the young ranchero, fairly purple with passion, his hands nervously fingering the weapons in his belt.

Colonel Vanderlyn turned upon him with uplifted finger, his eyes flashing a stern warning as he uttered:

"I beg you will keep silence, sir, until called upon. You have placed yourself in my hands, and have promised to abide by my decision. If you prefer to break your pledge—"

"You know I can't," the other replied, sullenly, his voice sounding harsh and choked. "I'd kill the white-livered whelp in his tracks, else! But I'm bound to get even—mind that!"

"Mr. Bohce, are you willing to abide by the decision reached by our friend Roberts and myself, after consultation? If we decide that the affair shall go no further, will—"

"There needs no further deliberation that I am aware of, in this case," was the cold interruption. "That fellow thinks he requires satisfaction. I am quite ready to give it to him. All I ask is half a chance. As to the when, where and how, I am perfectly indifferent."

"Very well. A blow calls for a blow. Let the score be made even, and then the matter can

be settled finally at another time," decided Vanderlyn.

"Clear as mud!" bluntly ejaculated Bohce, showing his white teeth in a sarcastic smile. "I suppose I am to stand up like a little angel and turn first one cheek and then the other toward your principal?"

"And close your eyes, too, or the red-cheeked ruffler wouldn't dare strike at a man from in front, even then!" cried Jessie, from the cabin door, plainly glorying in the spirit so unexpectedly displayed by the generally despised and belittled Parson.

"Dad-scorch you, Jes!" muttered Dike Roberts, frowning ferociously, but with a twinkle in his dark eyes that showed how he secretly gloried in the spunk of the little girl. "Git onder kiver with you, an' hold your hush—you hear me?"

Demas Fee uttered a grating oath. Colonel Vanderlyn tugged heavily at his drooping mustaches, but his tones were cold and hard as he spoke again:

"You are presuming on your being unarmed, Mr. Bohce. Considerable allowance can be made, under such circumstances, but for your own sake, I trust you will not overstep the limit."

"Durn so much palaver!" growled Demas Fee, fairly boiling over with mad wrath and hatred. "Spit it out in one word, or I will. I'd riddle the whelp, but my hands are bound by—"

"Once more, be quiet!" sternly interposed the colonel, turning upon his principal with a portentous frown, and thus missing the keen light which shot into the eyes of the Parson.

"Make him come to Limerick, then!"

"I'm ready at the word, bully," coldly uttered Bohce. "All I want to know is the time, place and method."

"Right now, durn ye!" snarled the bully, throwing off all control and stepping forward. "If I can't shoot, I can lick ye so your own mammy wouldn't know her pet cub!"

"You can try, better say, bully," calmly amended Bohce.

"Are you willing to meet him in a fair fist-fight?" eagerly asked the colonel, his eyes aglow.

"Any way you please. Lead the way to a quiet spot, and—"

"Right here and now!" cried Demas Fee, unluckily his belt of arms and casting it to one side. "Jes' saw you spat me when I wasn't prepared; she shall see me lick you until you beg like an egg-sucking cur under the lash!"

Alva Bohce hesitated, glancing toward the cabin and meeting the eager gaze of the red-headed girl. He smiled and gave a barely-perceptible nod. Jessie read the gesture aright, and the grave, anxious expression fled from her face and she cried:

"A new saddle against a new canoe that the sinner goes down before the saint!"

"You Jes'!" sternly warned Dike Roberts.

"If you lose, I'll cheerfully pay the debt, Miss Roberts," laughed Bohce, tossing his perforated head-gear to one side.

"If I leave enough of you in one piece to find your pocket-book!" sneered Demas Fee, his face lighting up remarkably now that he saw a prospect of fairly wiping out the stain cast upon his manhood by the despised Parson. "If I could only insure your not yelping enough under five minutes, I wouldn't change places with an angel right from heaven!"

"I'll try my level best to make those five minutes the most interesting of your life, bully, if you hold out that long," lightly laughed Bohce, as he cast aside his coat and turned back his damp wristbands.

Dike Roberts seemed fairly on the fence and at a loss which champion to crow for. All his interests, as he viewed them, pulled toward Demas Fee, but at the same time the wholly unexpected pluck and nerve displayed by the Parson, whom he, in common with nearly every one living on Rackabout Range, had placed down as a poor weakling, the mere counterfeit of a man as considered from a "wild and woolly" standpoint, won his admiration despite himself.

He fidgeted about uneasily while Demas Fee was completing his ominous preparations for the fight, and when Alva Bohce folded his arms and quietly watched the athletic ranchero stripping, he could not refrain from muttering:

"Durn it all, lad! you ain't goin' to fight with all them tight clothes onto ye! An' Demas the wust two-handed fighter on all Rackabout Range! Strip to it, lad, an' I'll make Jes' git inside an' shet the do' ef you're bashful."

Alva Bohce cast a grateful glance on the squatter, his voice softer than it had been since the disturbance began, save and except during his brief remarks to Jessie.

"Thanks, Mr. Roberts, but I hardly think it necessary. The rum-bibber is quite heavily enough handicapped as it is."

"You don't really think you kin lick him?" ejaculated the squatter, his eyes widely distended.

"No; I know I can," was the cool response.

The conversation was checked by the actions of Colonel Vanderlyn, who paused midway between the two rivals, saying:

"It is understood that you two are to settle this unfortunate affair between yourselves, with nature's weapons alone. All's fair, so long as

neither one attempts to make use of a deadly weapon, and the fight ends the moment one is knocked out, or cries enough. Do you agree, gentlemen?"

Before either could answer, Jessie called out clear and sharp, at the same time producing a revolver from a fold in her dress, where her little right hand had been hiding it.

"It's got to be fair play! I'll drill the one who attempts to foul—whether it be one of the fighters or one of the lookers-on! You want to make a note of that, all!"

"You Jes!" cried Dike, one hand going up to his face to cover the broad grin called into existence by the pluck of his petticoated idol.

"Yes, pap," was the obedient reply. "But all the same you can take your share of the warning. I mean business. The Parson shall have fair play, or I'll know the reason why!"

All this was bitter as gall to Demas Fee, and with a muffled howl, he strode forward, brushing the colonel from his path, and then rushing furiously upon his rival.

Even yet he could not believe that Alva Bohee was any other than the weakling he had set him down at first sight. He felt that he could crush him down at one stroke, and burning to show Jessie how poor and trifling was her champion, he cast all prudence and science to the winds.

Lightly, laughing softly, Alva Bohee eluded his furious rush, dodging to one side and again leaving the print of his gloved fingers on the cheek nearest to him. It was an open-handed stroke, though it sounded almost like a pistol crack, so much power was lent to it by those deceiving arms and shoulders of the Parson.

Dike Roberts smothered a grim chuckle. Jessie laughed outright as she saw the blow and noted how savagely Demas Fee smote the air where his rival had stood an instant before. Colonel Vanderlyn frowned darkly and tugged his huge mustache until some of the cherished hairs came out in his grasp. He was cool enough to see the Parson's object, and he saw, too, that he was in a fair way of gaining it.

Fairly blinded with rage, hatred and mortification, Demas Fee whirled around and rushed at his foe after the same manner, attempting no guard, caring nothing for the punishment he might receive so he could once get his arms about the Parson and bring him to close quarters. Then—

This time Bohee did not dodge or give an inch, but with a straight, swift blow he checked the rush of his burly antagonist, his gloved knuckles cutting through the skin and sending a little spray of blood over the flushed face. It was a blow that would have lifted nearly any man clear off his feet, but it only propped Demas Fee up straight, leaving his face unguarded for a second and a third blow from these small but dangerous fists.

Spat—spat! the blows came, and with a muffled howl, the athletic ranchero staggered back a pace and fell heavily.

Only to roll over swiftly, in order to evade the expected onset, then scrambling to his feet and dashing the blood from his eyes to behold the Parson coolly awaiting him, laughing!

"Why, you poor devil!" he exclaimed, in lofty contempt, as Fee steadied himself, partially sobered by the punishment already received. "Who told you you were a fighter? You could get damages for slander before any court in the land, if—"

A merry laugh coming from the lips of Jessie Roberts added to the hot rage which filled Demas Fee to overflowing as he heard those almost pitying words, and forgetting his half-formed resolution to fight with more coolness, he again rushed headlong upon his punishment.

Swift and viciously those gloved hands did their work, each stroke leaving its mark behind it, adding to the disgusting appearance of the bully's face, now covered with the blood that flowed from a dozen cuts. Yet, terribly as he was punishing his antagonist, those who watched the exciting event felt in their hearts that Alva Bohee was holding his powers in reserve. It seemed to them that he was able to end the fight at any moment the fancy took him. They felt that he was determined to make Demas Fee a sample to circulate among those who had openly expressed their dislike or contempt for the Parson—and they were right!

Alva Bohee felt that he could no longer maintain his peaceful character and live on Rackabout Range. He knew that Demas Fee was quite generally regarded as a sort of chief and leader by the young bloods of the Range, and for that reason, among others, he resolved to set him up as an example.

Demas Fee showed plenty of pluck and a wonderful ability to endure punishment, but that was about all the part he took in the fight, after the first blow was struck. Not once did he succeed in coming to a close with his active antagonist, and only two or three times did his heavy fists touch Bohee; nor then with force enough to make any impression, much less turn the tide that set so heavily against him from the first.

"When you come again, bully, you'll go down to stay," said Bohee, coldly, as he stood at ease, waiting for Fee to regain his feet. "I've writ-

ten my proclamation to your fellows on your face in characters plain enough for the most stupid of them all to read aright, and that is all I wanted. If you have suffered enough, say so, and I'll omit the closing act."

"Not yet—I'm man enough to down you yet, you laughing devil!" panted Fee, brushing the blood from his almost closed eyes.

"Are you? Then—business!" grated Bohee, leaning forward.

He tapped Demas on the temple with one hand, then sent his other straight at the unguarded throat. Without a groan or a sound, the athlete fell backward, striking the ground with the lifeless sound which a bag of sand would give. That alone was proof how thoroughly Bohee had kept his word, and as the colonel sprung to pick up his friend, the Parson turned away to put on his coat, without taking the trouble to glance at his fallen antagonist.

"You've killed him with your infernal skill!" cried Colonel Vanderlyn, as he raised up the ghastly head.

"If so, he would have it, remember," was the cold retort. "But you are needlessly alarmed. Give him a cold bath, lance his eyes a little more than I have done, and he will be on his feet in an hour. I only wanted to punish him."

"Durned if you didn't do it, too!" muttered Roberts, a curious conflict visible in his eyes and on his weather-beaten countenance. "As pretty work as I ever see'd—but all the same, young feller, you don't want to come back here no more—mind that, now, will ye?"

"I make no promises—only this," and Alva turned toward Jessie, who leaped forward to meet him as he held out his bare hands, the bloody gloves being cast aside. "I am coming back for your answer, little one, when I think you have had time sufficient for weighing the matter carefully. Until then, adieu!"

He bowed his head over the little hand, despite the surly growl which Dike Roberts gave, then turned toward the colonel.

"If your dear friend has not got all the satisfaction he can digest, colonel, he knows where I may be found at any time. Or, if he has any friends who would like to take up his quarrel where he left off, I will be most happy to accommodate them as far as it lies in my power."

Colonel Vanderlyn nodded, but said nothing. "Then, allow me to bid you all good-day," lifting his perforated hat with exaggerated politeness. "I will attend the meeting at Stokeley's, called for this evening. I hope Mr. Fee will be sufficiently himself to be present."

He turned and strode away to his horse, mounting and riding off at a rapid pace.

CHAPTER XI.

THE GATHERING AT STOKLEY'S.

"STOKLEY'S" was situated nearly in the center of the vast tract of land known as Rackabout Range, and was rather a novelty after its way.

This range was far from any town or place sufficiently large to furnish supplies in large quantities, such as are required by a number of stock ranches, and it was not only inconvenient but expensive for the ranchers to do their own freighting. In consequence, after fully discussing the situation, the ranchers "chipped in" and had a good-sized building erected near the center of their claims, to answer as a sort of tavern, store, public hall, and place of general utility. At first the building and its privileges were yearly disposed of by lot, for there was a good profit made on selling goods to the other members of the association; but before long this short tenure proved unsatisfactory, and when a stranger came to the annual sale and bid a fair price for the situation, offering to purchase the building if the owners would sell, and to give bonds to keep a sufficient stock of goods on hand to supply any reasonable demand by the ranchers, Colonel Vanderlyn moved that the offer be accepted at once. His advice was followed, and from that day the "Longhorn Ranch" became known to men as "Stokeley's," after the man who purchased it.

There were four in the Stokeley family, and a rare quartette they made, sure enough!

Clem Stokeley, the eldest and the one who effected the transfer, was fleshy when he first entered the presence of the Rackabout Range syndicate, but he had grown immensely fat since then, and now did little else than fill a mammoth chair in the comfortable bar-room of the tavern, and smoke and test his own liquor. There were those who declared their willingness to swear that he had not left his chair for years, even to go to bed. It is barely possible that they were right, for Old Clem could sleep with wonderful ease and profundity in his chair, while his peculiarly shaped club feet, with huge flat heels and pointed toes that rose at an angle of forty-five degrees, threatening to cut the cords of the opposite ankle each time he attempted to step, had rendered it slow and ticklish work for him to play the pedestrian even before he grew so gross in body.

Polly, his wife, was almost his exact opposite in physical qualities. Tall, thin to emaciation, angular in figure and hatchet-faced, she was in constant motion throughout the day and night. Like her body, her tongue hardly knew what it was to be at rest, but kept wagging away as

though run by machinery on the perpetual motion principle.

Their two sons, Marsh and Tip Stokeley, were almost as sharply contrasted, the former taking after his father, the other most resembling his mother; the first a burly, sluggish moving fellow, but little less than a human avalanche when he once got fairly in motion; the last a withered, impish-looking rascal, who seemed to be born old.

There was a goodly gathering at Stokeley's on the evening of the day whose various events we have been recording, in answer to a call issued by Colonel Victor Vanderlyn and Jehudi Fee.

All that day, cowboy messengers had been in the saddle, going the rounds, leaving word at each ranch for the owners to attend the meeting, bringing with them such of their men as had financial interests in the Range. No explanation was given by the messengers, for they were unable to impart what they did not possess, and perhaps it was as much curiosity as anything else that made every man summoned turn out and ride to Stokeley's that summer night.

Colonel Victor Vanderlyn and the Fees, both father and son, were first at the rendezvous, and before the people began to flock in, they had Clem Stokeley and his huge chair rolled out of the bar-room by his dutiful sons, superintended by the skeleton-like virago.

Demas Fee was a lamentable-looking spectacle, his face being one mass of livid bruises and purple cuts, but he showed little the worse for his thorough thrashing in other respects. He had a good constitution, and great powers of recuperation. Colonel Vanderlyn had treated him skillfully, and Demas could see reasonably well out of his eyes, was steady on his feet, showing little stiffness or soreness, though it would be weeks before he lost all traces of that scientific flogging.

Naturally enough, his highly ornamented frontispiece attracted the attention and aroused the curiosity of each new-comer, and Demas was kept pretty busy in explaining how he became such a spectacle. This he did frankly and without any attempt at disguising the truth. He seemed to feel a certain degree of admiration for the man who had whipped him so thoroughly, though he declared that the end was not yet; that he intended to pick his flint and try it again, as soon as he got into fit condition.

"I don't love him any more than I did this morning, you understand," he earnestly added, as he stood in the center of a curious, laughing crowd. "Few men would have their hate turned to love by getting such an unmerciful thumping as this."

"But he didn't do it alone? Not the Parson?" interrupted one of the company, in an incredulous tone that only voiced the sentiment of the entire assembly.

"I only wish he hadn't," replied Demas, with a smile that could hardly be recognized as such, so battered was his face. "I could crow in a good deal louder voice, then; but it's the truth, gentlemen. He licked me, and licked me scientifically, too, with his fists. And I'm open to bet my last dollar at even, that he can whip the best man on Rackabout Range, fair fist-fight."

"Oh, git out!"

"Listen to that, will ye?"

"Then he's a bloody fool for sticking to cattle, when he can rake in a range, ranch, stock and all every day in the week by the use of his fists! But you don't mean it, Fee?"

"Don't I? I tell you gents, we've been mightily fooled in that fellow. If he's a parson, as we dubbed him, be sure he belongs to the muscular christianity division. He licked me, and I reckon you'll hardly deny that I grew my spurs some little bit ago. He said that if I had any friends who felt like taking up my quarrel where I left off, he would be pleased to accommodate them at any time. That from now on he meant to cut a clean swath, let who would step in his way. And I am open to bet big money that he meant every word he uttered, too!"

He paused abruptly, for just then Alva Bohee entered the room, politely but coldly saluting the company.

Alva Bohee, but not the person they had dubbed "the Parson" in ridicule, so far as his present appearance went. Instead of the broadcloth clothes and the glossy silk hat, the morocco boots and kid gloves, Alva Bohee was clad in stout corduroy and woolen, with heavy riding-boots on his feet and a broad-brimmed, pearl-gray soft felt hat on his head. Around his waist was buckled a leather belt, supporting a stout knife and a brace of six-shooters, of the navy size, such as a man wears who means plain business when he draws on an enemy.

Demas Fee laughed softly as he noted the surprise written on the faces of his friends at this wonderful transformation in the appearance of "the Parson," and then nodded with more cordiality than he had ever shown Alva Bohee before as the eyes of the young ranchero rested upon his bruised face.

As though he had only been waiting for this arrival, Colonel Vanderlyn rose from his chair and removing his hat, rapped sharply with his knuckles on the round table before him.

"Gentlemen, if you will have the kindness to

come to order, we will get down to business at once," he said, his voice ringing out clear and distinct.

In their eagerness to learn the meaning of the mysterious call for a meeting, even the transformation in "the Parson" was lost sight of by the ranchers, and instantly all became quiet, every eye turning upon the tall, soldierly figure of the colonel.

Vanderlyn glanced around the spacious room. He saw that the door was closed by Tip Stokeley. The heavy wooden shutters had long since been put up at each window.

"Before explaining just what induced me to issue this call for a meeting, gentlemen, I beg your indulgence for a few moments while I outline the situation as it now stands on Rackabout Range. You all know pretty much how it is, but perhaps I can tell you better how we are regarded by outside eyes, thanks to my recent trips south and east."

"I reckon Rackabout Range kin run Rackabout Range her own self, kunnell," ejaculated one half-drunken ranchero.

Vanderlyn frowned slightly, but paid no further attention to the interruption.

"You all know that of late there has been more rascality afoot on the Range than of former days. You know that many of us have suffered severely from stock-thieves, who have done their work so adroitly that we have failed in every instance to either recover our property or capture the thieves. Nor is this all; though the thefts have proved by far the most annoying to us, outside by far the most attention is paid to the vast amount of counterfeit coin now in circulation, and which many do not hesitate to say is first started in circulation, if not actually manufactured, somewhere within the limits of Rackabout Range."

"Whosays so?" vociferated the individual who made the former interruption, his face aglow, his heavy fists doubled up and shaking in the air with drunken ferocity. "I kin lick the stuffin' out o' any dirty galoot as throws mud in the face o' Rackabout Range! I kin—"

Colonel Vanderlyn waved his hand impatiently, and the next moment Marsh Stokeley twisted the excited defender of his beloved Range into a chair, holding him helpless with one hand, while a huge fist was held significantly under his nose.

"You want to hold your hush, honey, or meb-be you'll git bad choked when you try to swallow that leg o' mutton," the giant uttered placidly, without the slightest appearance of anger, but stolidly in earnest, as all who heard him knew.

"If there were not good grounds for the charge, we could better afford to treat the matter with silent contempt," added the colonel, his voice grave and earnest. "I fear it is an ugly fact, though, that we have cunning law-breakers in our very midst—perhaps those whom we are least likely to suspect as such. And fearing this, knowing that the Governor of the Territory is taking action to bring out the whole facts, I deemed it no more than just and right to summon you all here to-night, to learn the contents of a letter which I received this morning in a rather mysterious manner, and bearing the signature of Masked Mark."

There was an excited stir and a busy hum among the gathering at this unexpected announcement, and the circle about the round table suddenly contracted as Colonel Vanderlyn produced a paper from his pocket, deliberately unfolding it and clearing his voice.

"I found this paper pinned to the door of my chamber when I arose, this morning," he said, quietly. "How it came there, none of my people could explain. No stranger had been seen about the premises, that I could hear of. However, the point that interests us the most closely is the contents."

"It is directed to me, and then goes on to say, in substance, that the writer, who prefers to maintain his *incognito* as Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective, until a full and complete understanding is arrived at, has been sent here by the governor to ferret out the counterfeiters who have recently been flooding the country with spurious coin. He further adds that he believes that he is on the track of the chief criminals, and wishes to meet a committee of our best men, to lay before them his proofs, before making any arrests. He does this, he says, because so many wild and ridiculous stories have been put in circulation about him and generally believed, that he fears he would have trouble, if not be utterly foiled, should he attempt to perform his sworn duty without first coming to an understanding with us."

"He said that he would come to this house this evening, to meet the chosen committee. After consulting with our mutual friend, Jehudi Fee, it was decided best to summon every man who owned a ranch on the Range to attend, instead of selecting a few, believing that all have an equal right to be represented at such a conference."

He ceased speaking for a few moments, his dark eyes roving keenly over the circle of interested faces. Then he added in a cold, stern voice:

"There was still another reason for calling

this gathering to meet the detective sent here by the governor. If the guilty ones are among us, and Masked Mark has proofs as he affirms, what better time to make arrests than when all the honest citizens are assembled together to lend their support to the arm of the law?"

"And to make sure that the plan does not miscarry, no man who has crossed the threshold of this room will be permitted to leave it before the end is reached," said a harsh, unpleasant voice which all there recognized as that belonging to Jehudi Fee, the father of Demas.

An ominous silence followed this harsh speech, and the ranchers interchanged quick, suspicious glances, as though each one was trying to divine which among them all was the guilty man. Already the seeds of discord were sown, and men were set against their neighbors as they had never been before.

Colonel Vanderlyn could not help noticing this, and he spoke again, his voice steady and resolute:

"I know it is hard to think that perhaps among those who have been most honored and respected, the guilty ones stand; but I, for one, pledge myself to know no favor, to permit no sentiment of friendship to stand between the criminal and the law. If Masked Mark can make his words good—if he can show that any man among the present company is really one of the counterfeiters or stock-thieves—I stand ready to aid him in making the arrest or arrests, let who will oppose!"

"And now, gentlemen, pending the arrival of Masked Mark, whom I firmly believe to be really the legal representative of our governor in this matter, I would like to hear some others give their opinion on this subject."

He fell back, and after a brief hesitation, Demas Fee moved forward, leaning one hand carelessly on the table, his bruised face lighted up by a faint smile.

"Gentlemen, though I am one of the youngest among you, and though I am a better private than leader, there is one thing I wish to say, to set myself right in my own estimation, even if it is not exactly what the colonel meant by his invitation."

"Like more than one among those I see before me, I have made an egregious ass of myself during the past few weeks, besides doing a neighbor serious injustice in my own mind."

"I allude to Mr. Alva Bohee," bowing toward that personage, with an off-hand politeness that was as manly as it was unexpected to the recipient. "Until this evening, I believed he had been playing the part of the mysterious horseman known to us only as Masked Mark. Never mind what motives I attributed to him; enough that I made a fool of myself in that respect, also; enough that I am now fully convinced of my error, and ask the gentleman's pardon for my mistake."

This was still another surprise to the crowd, and as Demas Fee paused to bow again to Alva Bohee, by no means the least astonished of the company, a little buzz ran around the room. Demas laughed shortly, then resumed:

"If I have no other good qualities to boast of, still I hold that I am an honest man, and as such, when I become convinced that I have been following a wrong trail, I am not ashamed to make the admission. My eyes have been opened to my mistake—and they were opened by the same fists that closed them in less time and with less trouble than I could have believed lay in the power of mortal man to do."

It was a generous speech for any man to make, and coming from one who had so bitterly opposed and ridiculed "the Parson" from the first day of his appearance on Rackabout Range, the surprise was complete. It was more to at least one of the gathering, and before Demas could say more, he was rudely pushed aside by his father, who faced the crowd, his eyes aglow.

He was tall, muscular, without a pound of superfluous flesh about his person. His bony face was sternly handsome, his jet-black eyes now flaming with rage, his naturally harsh and stern voice harder than ever as he ejaculated:

"Men of Rackabout Range, I never thought the day would come when I would feel obliged to rise before you to apologize for one of my own flesh. My cheeks are burning with shame for the craven words I have just listened to, from the lips of my son. If he was not ashamed to stand before you and give them utterance, I am ashamed for him!"

"As for you," and his bony forefinger pointed direct at Alva Bohee; "if you have made a whimpering cur out of my son, it is time for the father, old as he is, to uphold the honor of his name! You come of a bad tribe, if the specimens sent here have been fair samples of the stock. Your brother was no good before you, though at least he was no hypocrite as you have shown yourself."

"My brother lies in his grave; attack me, if you choose, and I can still make allowance for your gray hairs; but not even old age shall protect the slanderer of my dead!" cried Alva Bohee, his voice clear and menacing, his blue eyes aglow.

"I never have pleaded age as a protection against my enemies—I never will, least of all

against you, boy!" was the bitter retort. "If my son is cur enough to stay whipped, without an effort to retrieve his honor I'll take his place and wipe out the stain or die trying!"

Stiffly erect the old man stood, glaring wickedly upon the pale face of the man he plainly hated so intensely. Alva Bohee moved a step toward him, smiling coldly as the other touched the butt of a revolver, his voice cold and cutting:

"I came here a stranger, because my brother was foully murdered. Instead of sympathy, I met nothing but dislike, hatred and ridicule from those who, if honest and with clean hands, should have lent me warmest aid in searching for the dastardly criminal. I have gone my own way, submitting to cruel insults until forbearance has long ceased to be a virtue. Now, I mean to fight all who bar my way—and fight to kill!"

"As for Masked Mark—"

"He is able to speak for himself, I reckon!"

CHAPTER XII.

A MAN OF NERVE.

THE heavy door leading out into the night swung open, and as a man stepped across the threshold he uttered those words in a clear, resonant tone, in which there was a barely perceptible twang, either natural or admirably assumed.

Instantly all eyes were turned in that direction, and a sibilous sound ran through the gathering as they recognized in the new-comer the man whom they had been summoned thither to meet—the mysterious horseman who had given himself the title of Masked Mark!

For the first few moments all was surprise and wonder, despite the fact that the ranchers had been informed of his intended coming, and they could do nothing but stare at the one whose doings, real or suspected, had occupied so many of their leisure hours of late. For many this was the first glimpse they had had of the strange rider. A few had caught more or less vague glimpses of him at odd times, always mounted on his blood-bay steed, and generally riding at speed; but not one among all those who looked so eagerly upon him now, had ever seen him near or distinctly enough to give anything like an accurate description of his face or figure.

They beheld a man of little more than the medium height, with a strong and active figure, clad in garments of Western cut, formed for service rather than looks. On his head was a broad-brimmed felt hat, pushed up in front to give his eyes full play, a little fringe of dark-brown hair showing beneath the sweat-band on his forehead. As for the rest of his face, all they could see were the keen, alert eyes themselves, shining like twin balls filled with fire.

The light was sufficiently clear for them to detect the mask which covered his actual identity, perfect though it was after its fashion. It was faulty in only the one respect; it retained its immobility while its wearer was speaking, instead of marking each passing emotion.

To this mask the greatest attention was given during those first few moments following the abrupt appearance of the man with the hidden face, but there were those among the ranchers who noticed the broad leather belt which encircled Masked Mark's waist, and saw that his gloved hands rested significantly upon the butts of heavy six-shooters. It was clear to them that Masked Mark did not propose to trust himself blindly among them; and that very fact, smacking of danger though it did, bade fair to bring on a collision.

The low hum of curiosity which first rose among the men of Rackabout Range, gradually changed its purport until it became little less menacing than the growl of a tiger disturbed in its lair. Ugly and threatening looks chased away the expression of wondering curiosity. Parted teeth came together with a suddenness that sent a little chorus of clicks around the room. Strong hands dropped to knife-haft or pistol-butt, and eyes flashed redly as they fixed upon the man with the hidden face.

There was a storm brewing in the room that might well cause the bravest spirit to quail before it in terror; but though the door still stood open at his back, and a single leap would be quite sufficient to carry him not only out of range, but into comparative safety, Masked Mark boldly faced the gathering, his pistols slipping from their scabbards, their muzzles raised sufficiently to cover the nearest of the ranchers, though his hands still remained at the level of his waist.

Whatever else he might be, it was clear that Masked Mark could not rightfully be accused of cowardice.

"I come with peace in my heart, gentlemen, though determined to perform my duty, let the consequences be what they may," he uttered, in that peculiar tone of voice which has already been noticed. "But if you are resolved to make it war, let the band begin to play just as soon as the leader thinks the proper time has arrived for the ball to open."

With a sharp, commanding cry, Colonel Vanderlyn sprang before the crowd, facing them

and lifting his hands imploringly, yet at the same time with a certain degree of menace in his voice and motions.

"Gentlemen, I beg of you to hold your hands! By implication, if not in actual words, I have pledged my honor that you will listen to what this gentleman has to say, before taking any steps for or against him. I never yet have broken my word when it was passed to either a friend or an enemy. Not even you can break the record now, without taking me into camp too! You must walk over me before you strike Masked Mark!"

"Ditto to ditto!" cried Demas Fee, joining his leader, a brace of very business-like revolvers filling his hands.

It was only three men to a score, even yet, but that was sufficient to recall the more turbulent to their senses. After all, what could they bring against this man of the hidden face? What crimes lay at his door? Not one that they could point out; there was only vague and shadowy suspicion hovering about him, born of his mysterious identity and movements.

Those whose frowns had been the blankest, whose hands had been first to grip pistol or knife, now looked the most confused and abashed. The victory was won, and not a blow had been struck.

Colonel Vanderlyn saw this, and he was adroit enough to make the most of it, without rubbing salt into the wounds of those whom his prompt and decisive action had worsted. In an instant his demeanor altered, and one just entering the room would never have suspected that, a moment before, bloodshed and death had been imminent.

The colonel closed the door, and then, with one arm linked in that of Masked Mark, he led the man with the hidden face up to the round table, standing by his side as he introduced him after a general fashion to the assembled ranchers.

"This is the gentleman whom we have gathered here to meet and consult with, neighbors. As one of yourselves, I bid him welcome, and assure him that if he proves himself a duly authorized agent of the Governor of the Territory, he will be aided as far as lies in our power.

"Friends and neighbors, have I spoken your sentiments?"

"Straight as a string, colonel!" cried Demas Fee.

And following this prompt lead, came a general cry of approval. Even strong and resolute men will follow an adroit leader, just as a flock of sheep follows its bell vether.

Among the voices that rung out so loudly, that of Alva Bohee was not heard. Instead, he looked gravely on, a cold, hard light filling his blue eyes. And on his pale face was an expression which would be very difficult to describe in words.

From the moment of the sharp interruption by Masked Mark, the young ranchero had never wavered in his keen and steady gaze into the eyes of the man with the hidden face. He seemed trying to look beneath that cunning mask to read the truth which lay hidden there. He seemed like one who expects a surprise, and who is trying to arm himself against it in advance.

Once or twice the eyes of Masked Mark wandered toward him, and keenly though they gleamed through the adroitly contrived openings in his mask, they never lingered long enough for the young ranchero to fully satisfy himself.

When Colonel Vanderlyn ended his off-hand introduction, and the little uproar which followed his appeal had subsided, Masked Mark slowly glanced over the eager, attentive faces, then spoke deliberately, clearly:

"Gentlemen: I am truly thankful to see such a full turn-out to-night, because I believe that justice will be the more surely performed. Though there may be more than one within the sound of my voice who has brought himself fairly within the ban of the law, I know that there are enough honest men present to aid me in carrying out my sworn duty.

"Before I reveal my main object in asking you to meet me here to-night, perhaps you will not object to a brief explanation on my part, since my peculiar actions since first coming to Rackabout Range have aroused your curiosity, if no more dangerous sentiment.

"In the first place, you may or may not be aware that outside of this immediate neighborhood, the Range has won for itself a most unenviable reputation; whether justly or undeservedly, I do not now undertake to say. It is sufficient for my purpose at present, that the facts of the case are exactly as I represent them.

"So many complaints were sent to the Governor of the Territory, that he could no longer afford to turn a deaf ear to the matter, and he resolved to determine the truth or falsity of the reports by sending a duly accredited agent to pay Rackabout Range a visit, to ascertain the precise facts. His excellency selected me for this purpose, and I pledged him my word that I would perform the duty to the best of my ability.

"He gave me full permission to work the racket after my own fashion, and I concluded to do so as Masked Mark, after I had made a certain amount of notes in another and vastly different character. Thanks to this precaution,

I learned enough of the Range and its inhabitants to carry on the role of the Mounted Detective with comparatively little difficulty."

Jehudi Fee, always captious, ever to be found on the wrong side of the fence, now stepped within the little circle of vacant space about the table, his voice harsh and suspicious as he uttered:

"It is easy to talk, and sometimes the most atrocious criminals can tell a story that would convince an angel they were little lower than Heaven itself. How do we know that you are what you represent yourself? That you are not one of the very rascals who have brought discredit on Rackabout Range, instead of a properly accredited agent of our good governor? I, for one, would be enabled to listen to your interesting history with more patience, could my mind be set at rest on this point."

This speech, though as a man and a neighbor Jehudi Fee was far from popular, drew forth a general inrurm of approval, which ended only when Masked Mark lifted his gloved hand as a signal for silence.

"What the gentleman says is fair enough, though, possibly, his wishes might have been more gracefully couched," the man with the hidden face uttered, bowing slightly toward the stiff and uncompromising figure before him, his eyes gleaming through his mask with a half-malicious light. "Still, I am asking no odds. I know my own footing, and—"

"The question is how are we to know your footing?" curiously interjected Jehudi Fee.

"By an inspection of my papers, if that will not be too much trouble for your honor," bowed Masked Mark.

"Trouble has nothing to do with business," was the cold retort. "If you carry the proper documents, I will cheerfully retract my words, and lend you all the aid in my power to arrest the criminals, let them be whom they may."

If stiff and harsh in his manner, Jehudi Fee plainly meant well, and a subdued cheer went up from the gathering.

Masked Mark again lifted his gloved hand, and when silence was restored, he spoke gravely:

"I want things to move smoothly, if it can be accomplished, and am willing to make all reasonable concessions toward that end. At the same time, I cannot be expected to publish my hand to the whole community, thus endangering my unfinished work. Though I have made a beginning, there is still much to unearth before Rackabout Range can be thoroughly purged of its evil and mischievous element. If I were to fully expose my cards, those whose necks are still outside the halter, might take the alarm and escape the traps set."

"Then you decline to show your credentials, after all this waste of breath and words?" exclaimed Jehudi Fee, his brows contracting, his thin lips closing ominously.

"To the entire company, most assuredly," was the cold reply. "I am willing to show them to you, and to the gentlemen whom the company may prefer to join with you in the examination, as a sort of committee. If this is not satisfactory, then I will play my hand out as I begun—alone!"

"It rests with the company," added Fee, glancing slowly around him. "I am willing to serve as one of the committee, in connection with those selected by the majority. Or, if any other man is preferred to me, I will cheerfully step aside in his favor. All I want is to know that we are proceeding according to law and justice."

"And because you are plainly suspicious of me and my motives, Mr. Fee, I insist on your forming one of the committee," quickly uttered Masked Mark. "If my documents are sufficient to satisfy you, then I know the most skeptical among this company will also be satisfied."

It was an adroit point, deftly carried, and the murmur that ran through the gathering showed Masked Mark how well he had chosen his words. And then a voice uttered the name of Colonel Victor Vanderlyn. Instantly it was taken up and repeated until the tavern rung again. Then another voice said:

"Let them select the third member, and get down to business. There has been thunder enough, and now we want to see where the lightning is going to strike first!"

Colonel Victor Vanderlyn and Jehudi Fee drew a little apart, and then returned to the table, naming a prominent ranchero as their associate.

Masked Mark produced a couple of folded papers from an inner pocket and handed them to the colonel, who looked them over, then passed them on to Jehudi Fee. In turn they were passed to Dick Morton, who finally returned them to the detective, who restored them to their hiding-place.

"Friends and neighbors," said Colonel Vanderlyn, his voice grave and earnest. "We have examined the papers produced by Masked Mark, and can bear witness that they are all he represents them. They prove him a duly appointed agent of our governor, authorized to make such arrests as he, in the performance of his duty, may deem proper. We recognize him as an officer of the law, and pledge ourselves to assist him in any move he may see fit to make as such. If he can remove the stigma that rests on our

fair country, he deserves our warmest thanks and most hearty co-operation.

"As a man who holds Rackabout Range very close to his heart, I ask you all to throw no obstacles in the way of his performing his sworn duty, even if you decline to lend him your assistance in arresting the criminals."

"Consider me one of the posse, colonel," laughed Demas Fee, as usual prompt to follow the lead of his friend.

Others spoke after the same tenor, and it became clear that Masked Mark would meet with little or no opposition from the majority of the ranchers, should he attempt to make any arrests. Yet there were some grave and dark countenances among the gathering; some who seemed ill at ease, either on their own account or that of their friends.

And gravest of all was the pale face of Alva Bohee!

Masked Mark glanced deliberately over the assembly, his dark eyes glittering through their twin apertures with a fire and animation in startling contrast with the immobility of his mask, otherwise so lifelike. To more than one then present and closely watching his every look, his slightest motion, he seemed some human tiger, crouching in ambush all ready to leap out upon his helpless prey, only his glowing eyes visible.

The silence, though so brief when measured by ordinary computation, grew so oppressive that when his voice broke it, a long breath of relief escaped many lungs.

"Gentlemen, now that your committee have examined my papers and pronounce them all right, I wish to say a few more words to you before getting down to business, pure and simple.

"Your governor sent me here to ferret out the rascals who have been flooding the Territory with counterfeit money. From secret information which his excellency received, he was led to believe that the criminals had their headquarters somewhere within the limits of Rackabout Range. With this clew to guide me, I came here as his representative.

"As a stranger, I was afraid to trust any one within the suspected limits, and after carefully weighing the facts, I concluded to take mystery as my right bower, and go ahead. If this had its drawbacks, so it possessed its advantages. As Masked Mark, I could go whither I pleased, taking care only to avoid coming in contact with any of you people. Then, when I laid aside my disguise, as I have frequently done, I could pass to and fro without question, sometimes in one character, sometimes in still another, and so sift the suspicions I formed as Masked Mark.

"This much to explain why I have played the Mounted Detective; and now to explain what I have discovered.

"The information sent the governor was true. The gang of criminals who have been counterfeiting both gold and silver coins, as well as stealing stock far and wide, actually have been living in your midst all the time, unsuspected, even honored by honest men, in some instances!

"I have secured an almost complete list of the gang, and think I can promise that the day is not very far distant when Rackabout Range will be wholly cleared of its dangerous crooks.

"It may surprise some among you why I speak thus freely, and so give the criminals a chance to escape the law; but when the end is reached, you will find that I am acting with both eyes open. Justice will get her deserts, never fear!"

Again he paused, leaning carelessly on the table with one hand, while his glittering eyes roved slowly, searchingly over the interested gathering. More than one face turned paler as those bright orbs paused for a breath upon it, and more than one hand moved gradually toward a weapon. But if Masked Mark saw anything of this, he made no sign. His voice was cold and steady as ever when he resumed:

"I have told you, gentlemen, what I have done; now I am ready to tell you what I am going to do. I am going to make one arrest this evening, quietly if I can, but make it I will, unless death steps in between me and the criminal. I can be foiled by death alone, and that death I am willing to face in the performance of my sworn duty. The criminal has some close friends present, no doubt, who will be reluctant to see him arrested, but if they value his life—if they do not wish to see his brains blown out before their eyes—they will act wisely in holding their hands. For I will arrest him, alive or dead! His friends may kill me, but not quick enough to prevent me from killing him!

"Men of Rackabout Range! The chief of the gang of counterfeiters, of horse and cattle thieves, is now among you! I can place my hand upon his shoulder by taking a single step forward! Look and see if you can recognize the man I mean!"

CHAPTER XIII.

MASKED MARK CLAIMS HIS PREY.

MASKED MARK ceased speaking, and once more his glittering eyes roved deliberately over the gathering, seeming to search each face

through and through, brief as was the period he dwelt upon it.

Was he speaking the truth, of his own thorough knowledge, or did he use those words counting on the criminal betraying himself by some sign of fear or desperation?

This was a question which few of the ranchers took the trouble to put to themselves, just then. The positive, yet obscure language used by the Mounted Detective excited them greatly. He declared that the chief of the criminal gang was even then standing in their midst, and as he paused before giving them any more direct clew, they glanced around them in the effort to make the discovery for themselves.

If strong agitation and disturbed countenances furnished proof, there were many among the gathering who might have been picked out as belonging to the crooked gang; but some there were whose faces grew pale with powerful excitement alone; some who trembled visibly, whose eyes glowed uneasily, whose hands nervously sought their weapons, but whose hearts and consciences were clean as newly-fallen snow, so far as any connection with the Crooks of Rackabout Range was concerned.

For this reason, if Masked Mark depended on the chief criminal to betray himself after this fashion, he would have a difficult task to decide between the guilty and the innocent.

Yet he stood there beside the table, one hand carelessly supporting the weight of his body, the other doubled up and reposing on his hip, in close proximity to the butt of a revolver, his keen eyes passing slowly from face to face until they rested on that of Alva Bohee.

Was it a mere coincidence? Or did his magnetic gaze draw all others after it?

From the first appearance of Masked Mark, the young ranchero who had undergone such a sudden and complete transformation, seemed ill at ease. His face grew pale and hard-set, his eyes following every motion made by the detective, his fingers twitching nervously, his whole appearance being that of a man who is puzzled sorely, and wholly at a loss what to do or say.

As the Mounted Detective proceeded, this agitation seemed to increase, and when he proposed showing his credentials to a committee of three, Alva Bohee involuntarily took a step in advance, as though he wished or expected to be included among that number. And as Colonel Vanderlyn and Dick Morton were selected to fill the vacancies, he fell back again with the troubled look deepening in his eyes.

With a breathless eagerness Alva Bohee watched and noted each movement that followed, at times forgetting the guard he was placing over himself in his all-absorbing interest. His gaze roved swiftly from the mask which hid the face of the detective from view, to the faces of the committee of three, and when the documents were handed back to Masked Mark, he drew a quick, audible breath that caused several of those who stood nearest to him, to glance hastily in his direction.

Then—when Masked Mark declared that the chief criminal at that very moment stood within reach of his good right hand, and bade the men of Rackabout Range look around them and see if they could point out the wrong-doer, Alva Bohee stood white as a corpse, his lips perceptibly quivering, a strange light filling his blue eyes as they rested with a half-dazed expression on the masked face.

And as the gaze of Masked Mark paused when it came to that white, troubled countenance, so the gaze of the ranchers paused, and it seemed as though they were almost ready to answer the closing words of the detective in the affirmative! For if ever mortal man was betrayed by his face, Alva Bohee was that man, then and there!

And as they gazed, the ranchers who stood nearest him involuntarily moved away, as men fall back from a suspected case of smallpox.

A swift flush came into the white face of the young ranchero as he observed this action, so significant when taken in connection with what had been said. Then his color vanished and left his countenance even paler than before, though now all traces of agitation vanished like magic and he confronted Masked Mark like an innocent man defying his malicious accuser, challenging him to produce his proofs.

A short, hard laugh broke from behind the immobile mask, as though the detective knew what caused that abrupt change, but felt confident that his game was already won. And so it was, if he aimed at Alva Bohee. That pale face and startled gaze had done its work only too well!

"Gentlemen," said Masked Mark, seeming to take a malicious delight in protracting the excitement; "you have taken the look about you as I requested, but before you mention the name of the man whom I charge with being head and front of all the crimes which have so disgraced the very name of your section in the eyes of the Territory at large, I wish to emphasize my position once more, that there may be no possible chance for a mistake on your part.

"I repeat that I have gathered sufficient proof to condemn the leader of the crooks, before any fair tribunal in all the land. If the

committee you selected to represent you see fit to make the demand, I will furnish them with a synopsis of my proofs before making the arrest, provided you will all see that no man leaves this room while your representatives are so engaged with me."

Colonel Vanderlyn exchanged quick glances with his two colleagues, then spoke up promptly:

"There is no particular necessity for that, as I see. You bear credentials that prove you a duly authorized representative of our governor. While you are empowered to arrest any and all offenders against the law, you do so at your own risk if those arrested can prove their innocence or your malicious abuse of power. That being the case, and as your proofs, if wholly or a part of verbal nature, might accidentally be overheard by those whose aim it would be to foil your further blows against crime, we prefer leaving the whole case in your hands, only promising to aid you to the extent of our power, in case of difficulty."

It was a deliberate, rather labored effort, but the colonel gained the point he wished to make. All who heard him knew that he was content to let Masked Mark take his own course, without interference.

"You speak for your colleagues, of course, colonel?" politely uttered Masked Mark.

"I fully indorse the position taken by Colonel Vanderlyn," stiffly replied Jehudi Fee.

"Same here," nodded Dick Morton.

"Thanks, gentlemen," bowed the detective. "I will not soon forget your courtesy to me a stranger in your midst."

As he spoke, his athletic figure drew erect, all traces of carelessness vanishing as by magic. His eyes glowed vividly through their twin apertures. His right hand tapped the butt of a revolver in emphasizing the words he uttered:

"Gentlemen, I have told you who I am and what object has brought me here. I have said that there is one man among you whom I am resolved to arrest this night, let the consequences be what they may; and I never go back on my word.

"That man may have friends and sworn allies present, who may think it their duty to resist his arrest, but if so, let them bear one little fact in mind. If they interfere, if they place so much as a single straw in my path when I am trying to enforce the law, the man they seek to shield will be the first one to suffer! Arrest him I will, though I perish the very next moment. And more—lightning could not paralyze my arm so suddenly that it would be unable to first kill the man for whom I have come here this night!

"Consider this, you who are in sympathy with the chief criminal. You may kill me, but you can't do it quick enough to save your leader. And if there is a spark of life left in my veins after sending him to his last account, I will cut as wide a swath through his helpers as one man can—be sure of that, my hearties!"

Masked Mark paused, nodding his head emphatically. Colonel Victor Vanderlyn spoke up, a trace of impatience in his voice, as though he was growing tired of the delay:

"No honest man among us will lift a finger to shield the criminal. More than that, I, for one, freely offer you my help to effect the arrest, if you see fit to accept it."

"And I'll lend the light of my beautifully decorated mug to strike terror into the heart of the rascal," laughed Demas Fee, promptly following the lead of his friend; but there was more than nonsense in the resolute manner in which he loosened his revolver in its scabbard and glanced around the room.

"It is not aid that I want, but a strict noninterference," shortly replied Masked Mark, as he left the table and stepped swiftly around it, facing Alva Bohee, one hand dropping heavily on the shoulder of the young ranchero as he added in a stern, pitiless tone: "I want you, my fine fellow!"

Though those present had been in a measure prepared for something like this, noting as they had the evident agitation and uneasiness of the Parson, a chorus of ejaculations rose on the air as Masked Mark claimed his victim.

His eyes flashed vividly as he whipped forth a revolver and faced the crowd.

"Keep your distance, gentlemen, unless some of you are just longing for a lightning trip to the other world! I mean business now, pure and simple!"

His tone and manner spoke even more plainly than his words, and only a fool could have doubted his earnestness. The ranchers fell back a little further, and he stood alone in the center of the room with his prisoner.

Twin spots of vivid red showed in the cheeks of Alva Bohee as that hand dropped upon his shoulder, but he stood motionless, making no effort to escape. And his voice was even, if low, when he uttered:

"What have I done to deserve this public shame, sir?"

"Nothing much," with a short, mocking laugh. "Only formed a gang of counterfeiters; only captained a squad of horse and cattle thieves; only stained your hands with human blood in—"

A wild, fierce outcry rose from the gathering at those last words, for they recalled the wild, extravagant rumors that had sprung into circulation, no one seemed able to say exactly how, but which connected Alva Bohee with the dastardly murder of his own brother!

Weapons were drawn and brandished in the lamplight. Men surged back and forth, those in the rear striving to get nearer the accused, while those already in front resisted their efforts, as probably endangering themselves. For, with a lightning movement, Masked Mark snapped a pair of handcuffs on the wrists of his prisoner, then whirled with a cocked revolver in each hand, his eyes glowing redly through his mask, his voice ringing out in stern, sharp menace:

"Keep your distance, gents! If you crowd me, Alva Bohee loses his brains, and then I'll try to cut my bigness through your ranks before you down me! I'm giving it to you straight as a string, and every word has the bark on it, too!"

"Peace, friends!" cried Colonel Vanderlyn, pushing his way through the excited mass, his hands armed, his voice stern and imploring at one and the same time. "Think what you are doing, I beg of you! Think twice before you find yourselves arrayed against the law! And against the friends of law and order, too! For I swear that I'll shoot down the first among you who dares touch either the detective or his prisoner!"

"Ditto to ditto, with a great big swear thrown for make-weight!" chimed in Demas Fee. "I'm getting so used to being licked, that I go against the crowd, every time!"

This half-laughing remark probably did more than the fiercest threats could have accomplished, for it raised a laugh; and men who laugh are slow to strike without reasoning.

During all this, Alva Bohee stood like one utterly bewildered, staring at the polished irons which clasped his wrists and rendered him as helpless as a child. Their cold touch had apparently taken away his proud spirit, and as he hung his head in seeming shame and wretchedness, many among the ranchers believed him the frightfully depraved wretch the words of Masked Mark would seem to indicate.

Masked Mark saw that the trouble was over, that there was no immediate danger of a rescue being attempted, and once more his heavy hand dropped on the shoulder of his prisoner.

"I arrest you, Alva Bohee, in the name of the law!" he said, his voice hard and un pitying. "If you go with me quietly, you shall be treated as kindly as circumstances will admit; if you try to make me trouble; or if any of your friends try to rescue you, so much the worse for you."

His harsh speech seemed to break the spell which had fallen upon the young ranchero, and he lifted his head with a proud, defiant toss, his blue eyes gazing unflinchingly into the dark orbs which glowed through the mask. And when he spoke, his voice was cold and even, very unlike that of a desperate criminal who sees his last hope vanishing forever:

"Be a little more sparing of your threats, fellow, until I give you at least a shadow of excuse for airing them. I swear that I am innocent of the charges you bring against me, but as an innocent man, confident that the simple truth will in the end bring justification to me and shame upon my enemies, I submit to your authority, as a detective, and will go with you quietly. I only ask decent treatment at your hands."

"That you shall have, be sure, as long as you deserve it," was the more civil reply; then Masked Mark turned once more toward the interested ranchers, saying:

"Gentlemen, I have made all the arrests I came here for, and now, with your kind permission, I will take my departure. Of course, I expect to leave without being molested or followed."

His air was hardly that of one who believed in his own confident words, but Colonel Vanderlyn came to his rescue.

"That, of course. You have only performed your duty as an officer of the law, and we, as law-abiding citizens, can have no right to interfere, unless you need and ask us to help you."

Masked Mark laughed softly.

"With only one prisoner to take care of, I hardly think I need trouble you, my dear sir. All the same, accept my hearty thanks for your kindness."

Colonel Vanderlyn bowed silently, turning toward the door and motioning aside all those who stood between. In silence the ranchers fell back, leaving a clear passage. If Alva Bohee had either friends or allies present, none of them made any move toward assisting him out of his unpleasant scrape.

Colonel Vanderlyn opened the door, and holding his prisoner by the arm, Masked Mark left the room. A brief period of breathless suspense: then there came to the ears of the men in the house the rapid trampling of horses' hoofs.

Colonel Vanderlyn closed the door and turned toward them with his eyes glowing vividly his strong face showing still stronger excitement. It was clear that the recent occurrence had powerfully affected him.

"Gentlemen, I thank you, in the name of law

and order, for your manly conduct during the difficult scene which has just terminated," he said, his voice showing a little of the agitation that glittered in his eyes. "Though this arrest has been quite as much a surprise to me as to the least-suspecting man among you, I would be lying were I to say that I am sorry. You know what powerful reasons I have for disliking the very name which the criminal just removed from our midst bears. You know that not long since the most desperate efforts were made to cover me with shame and obloquy—to connect me with the murder of Oren Bohee, this man's brother. You know who were the men most prominent in that matter—Barry Carlsworth and Frank Dymock. You know that I defeated them at every point, simply because I was innocent of even the thought of wrong-doing; you know that I proved an *alibi* by some of the best and most prominent gentlemen in the whole Territory; you know that my accusers were compelled to admit their error, and to apologize to the one they had wronged so bitterly. And knowing all this, I repeat, you cannot expect me to grieve deeply at the downfall of Alva Bohee.

"At the same time, I am not saying that he is guilty of the crimes charged against him by Masked Mark; that is a matter for the law to decide in proper time. But if he is guilty—if he is really the chief of the crooks who have made the very name of Rackabout Range stink in the nostrils of all honest men—he must have had others to assist him in his evil work, confederates who aided him in carrying out his cunningly arranged schemes.

"It is not for me to say who those assistants are; but, gentlemen, I cannot help asking you one question: Of all the men notified of this meeting to-night, and who promised to attend punctually, there are only two absent. Who are they?"

Scarcely had his lips formed the question when it was answered by a dozen voices, some of them ringing with suspicion, others expressing only surprise. The two names pronounced by the ranchers were Barry Carlsworth and Frank Dymock, the sworn comrades of Oren Bohee before his mysterious murder; the avowed friends of Alva Bohee since "the Parson" first made his appearance on Rackabout Range!

Until now their absence had not been noticed, or, if noticed, unmentioned; but when this fact was coupled with the words of Colonel Vanderlyn, sudden suspicions were aroused which would not be so easily quelled.

Yet the colonel had made no open charges. No one could take exception to his words, on the face of them. Yet all who heard him speak, felt that he was accusing the two missing men of being crooked—of being tarred with the same stick as the one whom they had so lately seen arrested for theft and counterfeiting, if not on still more serious charges!

For a few minutes silence reigned in the room. The men interchanged grave and troubled glances. They felt ill at ease, as though standing over a dangerous mine which they felt might be exploded at any moment.

Then they heard the steady trampling of horses' hoofs outside, and mechanically glanced toward the door. They heard the sounds draw nearer, pausing for an instant directly beyond the threshold, but before any one could make a move to open the barrier, it was flung violently inward, and a horse and rider filled the opening.

"Masked Mark!" ejaculated Colonel Vanderlyn, hoarsely.

Ay! Masked Mark—but not as he had so recently left their presence! Masked Mark—but with red blood on his mask!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FACE BENEATH THE MASK.

It was the bright blood-bay steed that had naturally become associated with Masked Mark in the minds of the men of Rackabout Range, by their being so often seen in company, and on its back was seated the figure with which they had become so familiar during the past two hours; there could be no possible doubt on either point.

Yet they stared as though unable to believe the evidence furnished by their own eyes, and more than one shrunk back from the ghastly visitor, beginning to tremble with superstitious fear. Why?

Only a few minutes before, Masked Mark had ridden away from the house, alive, well, an important prisoner in his custody, while now—

Though he filled the saddle of the blood-bay steed, and in his gloved right hand held the bridle-reins, Masked Mark was bending low over the neck of the trembling, snorting, uneasy creature. He swayed heavily at each motion of the horse. He made no answer to the low, startled cries which rose from the ranchers, nor lifted his chin from where it rested heavily upon his bosom.

And under the light of the lamps, those whose position favored a quarter-view, saw that the cunningly-contrived mask was stained with red blood! Saw that there was a long, red smear on the bosom of the gray shirt that seemed to be still damp, still lengthening even as they gazed in silent horror!

Colonel Victor Vanderlyn stared at the unexpected vision in open-lipped amazement for a brief space, then, as he also detected the terrible truth, he cried, hoarsely, starting back with widely distended eyes and paling visage:

"By heaven! he's murdered the old man! Out after him, men! Take him, dead or alive! A thousand dollars to the one!"

He abruptly ceased as a heavy hand fell upon his shoulder, whirling around with one hand dropping to a pistol butt. Demas Fee confronted him, his bruised face fairly livid, but his blackened eyes flashing fire as he hurriedly muttered a brief sentence.

While this was taking place—while the ranchers were gradually recovering from the strange spell which had been cast upon them by the bloody vision—a clear, impatient voice came from outside, uttering the words:

"Bear a hand, some of you fellows! Do you want to see a fellow-being perish so badly, that you can't move even a finger to ease him through?"

"Barry Carlsworth!" ejaculated one of the ranchers.

"Steady—look out for the devil's heels!" hastily said the spokesman outside, as the blood-bay gave signs of growing uneasiness, arching its back and nervously backing away from the flaring lights. "Quick! now you've got him—hold fast!"

A trim, athletic figure sprang to the head of the snorting horse, gripping it by bit and forelock, holding it steady by muscular power and skill, while the limp and nerveless shape was lifted from the saddle by another man beyond.

"All right, Frank—back the animal—so!"

The next instant the doorway was cleared and Barry Carlsworth crossed the threshold bearing in his arms the bloody figure of Masked Mark. Without a word to or a look at the assembled ranchers, he advanced until he could lower the form on the table in the center of the room.

It touched the boards with that peculiar, chilling sound given out only by a dead body!

Barry Carlsworth drew back a pace, removing his hat and sweeping one stained sleeve across his face, flushed with the exertion; but he paused abruptly midway, staring open-eyed at the pale and excited faces around him as though something he read there startled him seriously.

"One would say you had never seen a dead man before—if he is dead, as I begin to believe," he added hastily, turning partially toward the figure on the table.

"Who killed him? Did you do it, Barry Carlsworth?" grated Colonel Victor Vanderlyn, shaking off the hand which would have restrained him.

"I did not kill him," was the cold, even reply, as the dark eyes of the young ranchero met the blazing orbs of the old soldier. "But even if I had killed him, I would not recognize your right to question me in that tone of voice."

"He means no harm, Carlsworth," interjected Demas Fee, pushing between the two men, whom all Rackabout Range knew had precious little love for each other. "He is startled half-out of his senses, as are the most of us—and no wonder!" with a slight shiver and a sidelong glance toward that silent, blood-marked form on the table. "Hardly a minute ago he was here before us, alive and hearty; and now—dead!"

A puzzled look came into the face of the young ranchero as he listened to this hurried speech. His gaze followed that of the speaker to the table and back again. He was plainly at a loss to comprehend the meaning of at least a portion of the words uttered by Demas Fee, for he broke out with:

"Alive? Only a minute ago? Who do you mean, man?"

Jehudi Fee strode forward, one bony finger pointing to the lifeless shape on the table, his gaze fixed keenly on the face of Barry Carlsworth as though endeavoring to read his inmost thoughts as he coldly, sternly uttered:

"The man who, not quarter of an hour ago, left our presence alive and well, having in custody your sworn friend and ally, Alva Bohee! And now—he lies there, dead! Who killed him, Barry Carlsworth?"

An ugly chorus repeated the question, and as he glanced around the room, Barry saw dark and threatening faces turned upon him; saw strong hands claspng hafts of knives and butts of pistols, needing little more to hurl them at his throat in a wild, unreasoning body.

Yet he faced the peril without a shade of fear. His lips even parted in a half-smile, and as Frank Dymock entered the room, he called out in a clear, steady tone of voice:

"If that man on the table was here in your company, alive and well, less than two hours ago, I am drunk, crazy, or else there are two Masked Marks!"

"What does all this mean?" hurriedly uttered Frank Dymock, a man about the same age and general appearance as his comrade, save in complexion; that was dark as a Spaniard's, and his short, curling hair was black as midnight. "What's that about a duplicate Masked Mark, Barry?"

"They say Masked Mark was here in their

company, alive and well, less than a quarter of an hour ago!"

"Not *this* Masked Mark," and Frank Dymock placed one hand on the chest of the silent shape, boldly facing the startled, wondering, bewildered crowd. "I have just reached this house, and I can take oath that for the past two hours this man has never passed out of my sight for a single instant. Why, he can tell you as much himself, if— Hello! a flask of brandy, here! Quick! he must not die until he has told his story!"

There was no acting in Frank Dymock's tone or manner, as all who saw and heard him were thoroughly convinced. He gave a sharp start as his hand touched the motionless figure, and as he uttered those hurried words, he lifted the head of the masked man, bending his ear to his heart.

Only to utter a deep curse of disappointment as he again lowered the head to the table, facing the company, his voice hard and gloomy:

"It's no use—he's dead! And he's carried the best part of his secret with him, I'm sadly afraid!"

"Afraid is good!" sarcastically uttered Colonel Vanderlyn, now more like his usual self, cool and collected to all outward seeming, though his dark eyes glowed with a fire that seemed almost capable of scorching whatever it was turned on.

Frank Dymock turned upon the speaker, his brows knitting, his face growing hard-set and even menacing.

"What am I to infer by that remark, colonel?"

"That a man has been killed—perhaps murdered; who can say, now that his lips are forever sealed in death!"

"You can hint, it seems, Colonel Vanderlyn, at something even your own impudence is not capable of expressing in more positive terms," was the cold, stern retort as Dymock faced the giant soldier, evidently willing enough to come to a collision if such was the wish of his enemy.

But Jehudi Fee once more interposed, pushing Vanderlyn back with one hand, while the other bony member quivered before the face of Frank Dymock.

"There shall be no quarreling here, until after this mystery of bloodshed and death is fully cleared up. To you I appeal, men of Rackabout Range, and claim your aid in maintaining peace until this perplexing affair can be unraveled."

"Put 'em all under arrest, unless they'll swar to keep the peace!" cried one stern voice.

"Take their guns and knives away!" cried another.

Barry Carlsworth and Frank Dymock drew closer together as though to unite their little force, while the former cried:

"For myself and friend, Frank Dymock, I agree to keep the peace unless some one strikes the first blow; but don't insist on our giving up our arms, or there'll be trouble, red-hot!"

"My sentiments, exactly," cried Dymock, promptly.

Colonel Vanderlyn said nothing, but turned partly away, his brows corrugated, his eyes glowing, his face white and hard-set as though terrible passions were raging beneath cover.

"I am satisfied with your words of honor, gentlemen," said Jehudi Fee, his voice softening a little. "And now, as the shortest cut to the heart of the mystery, I ask permission of you all to remove the mask from the face of the dead man."

A chorus of cries filled the room, all of the same tenor, and interpreting them aright, Jehudi Fee moved closer to the table, bending over the head of the corpse, carefully inspecting the cunning mask and its manner of fastening. This he was not long in solving, and after a few seconds of deft manipulation of hidden springs and rubber cords, he removed the blood-stained mask, taking with it the wig and flowing beard.

One glance he cast into the exposed face, then he fell back, a cry of intense surprise escaping his lips.

"Lord of Hosts!" he gasped, in a harsh, strained voice. "It is the face of Dike Roberts!"

His words were true, as all within the room could see, as the light of the hanging lamp over the table fell fairly upon the unmasked face of the dead man.

Masked Mark was Dike Roberts, the old squatter!

Wild-eyed, the ranchers stared at the uncovered face, unable to believe the evidence of their senses. It seemed impossible that one with whose voice, figure and other characteristics they were so familiar, could have deceived them so completely, if not that night, at least for weeks past!

There was a little pressing and crowding as those in the rear ranks sought to obtain a clearer view of the dead man and his face, but no one seemed inclined to encroach on the open space immediately around the table, until Colonel Victor Vanderlyn strode forward and gazed with burning eyes at the livid face of the old squatter.

Then Demas Fee stepped forward, his face

stern and hard-set as he gazed upon the lifeless clay for a brief space. Only for an instant, as though to make sure there was no mistake; then, with his left hand resting lightly above the pulseless heart, his right hand raised above his head, he cried sternly:

"The father of the girl whom I love and hope to make my wife, is dead. He has no son to take up his quarrel, but I claim the right to act as one would were he here now. I want to know who killed Dike Roberts. I want to know what excuse he or they can give for cutting his life short. And to you, Barry Carlsworth and Frank Dymock, as the men who brought his lifeless body here, I turn for answers to those questions."

"We do not dispute your right to ask them, and even were your claims less just, I, for one, would think twice before denying a request couched so honestly and calmly," replied Barry, cordially. "But first, tell us what was meant by the statement that within the past half-hour Masked Mark was here—that he departed with Alva Bohee, our friend, a prisoner? Surely there must be some terrible mistake in all this!"

"If so, we are not accountable for it," was the grave reply. "Masked Mark—or one who claimed to be Masked Mark, a regularly appointed representative of the governor—came here to meet us, according to appointment. You received an invitation to be present, I believe?"

Both Carlsworth and Dymock bowed, gravely, silently.

"He kept his face hidden, by just such a mask as the one father removed from that face," shuddering slightly as he glanced down the still, pain-distorted face of the dead man; "but he showed us documents that seemed authentic, giving him power to arrest any and all persons whom he might find guilty of counterfeiting or stock-stealing. He arrested Alva Bohee, declaring him the head and front of the gang of crooks. He handcuffed him, and took him out that door. We heard the sound of his horse's feet as he rode off with his captive. We were still discussing the matter when you came bearing him with you—if not the Masked Mark we met here, his exact copy in every respect!"

The two young men who found themselves placed in such a strange, if not dangerous, position, interchanged grave and troubled looks. Then Barry spoke again:

"There is a strange, dark mystery lying beneath all this, and I very much fear that the whole truth lies buried in the still brain of Dike Roberts!"

"Possibly; but you have not yet answered the questions I asked you," sharply interposed Demas Fee.

"Tell them all, pard," curtly uttered Dymock. "It will be the quickest way to get on the trail of the cunning rascal who has played such a bold game—for game it *must* be! Alva Bohee is as innocent of wrong or crime as the unborn babe. And if he has been carried off by a masked man, it is for some vile and treacherous purpose, rather than to vindicate the laws."

"As you and I will prove with the last drop of our heart's blood, mate!" echoed Barry, as their strong hands came together in a firm grasp.

Barry Carlsworth faced the company, his face calm and composed, his voice clear and steady as he began his story:

"Friends and neighbors: in common with the rest of you, we were notified of this meeting and agreed to be present, though no hint of its object was given us. In good time I set out, and would have been here with the earliest, but for a series of curious events.

"I had agreed to meet Frank where our trails would come into one, which you all know is near the Jump-off. The one who reached there first was to wait for the other, and when I saw nothing of Frank, I stopped under the little grove of trees at that point, and lit a fresh cigar.

"I had hardly done this when I caught a faint glimpse of something moving along the bottom of the shallow *coulee*, just ahead. I could not make it out with anything like certainty, but fancied it a wolf or perhaps a mountain lion. I remember thinking that if it did not disappear before Frank came, we would bounce it out, and if a wolf, have a little spin over the level in chase; if a lion—well, we might take it into camp, if it didn't make too pointed objections.

"With this idea in mind, when I first caught sight of Frank riding along the edge of the shadow cast by the Jump-off on the level, I slipped out of the saddle and ran along to warn him, afraid the animal, as I took it to be, might take alarm at the sound of his hoof strokes and escape us.

"We were moving silently along to where I left my nag, when Frank caught sight of a horseman coming from the west, heading almost directly for the grove. And by the bright light of the moon, we distinctly saw and plainly recognized the man who has caused so much excitement on Rackabout Range of late—Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective!"

There was a low murmur among the ranchers

at this announcement, though they must have anticipated something of the sort, with the dead man lying on the table before them. Barry waited until silence was restored, then resumed:

"When we made this discovery, we forgot all about the animal or whatever it might be in the *coulee*, and stole on to reach the grove first, intending to hold Masked Mark up and carry him here to unmask him before you all. But before we or he gained the grove, a horseman dashed out of the head of the *coulee*, with a loud yell, commanding the other man to hold up his hands, but firing as fast as he could pull trigger.

"And in this second horseman, we saw the very counterpart of the first one! There were *two Masked Marks*, both mounted on dark horses, both wearing masks, unless the moonlight deceived us!"

Barry Carlsworth ceased speaking, for his voice was fairly drowned by the excited cries and exclamations which burst from the ranchers at this startling declaration.

Of all who listened, Jehudi Fee alone seemed unmoved, and it was his hard, cold tones that called the crowd to order.

"Silence, men! Let the gentleman finish his story, and then you can make your comments after the fashion that pleases you best. Silence!"

It was like a douche of ice-cold water. The wild cries and ejaculations died away, and silence once more reigned in the room. Barry Carlsworth quietly resumed his strange story.

"You can imagine something of our amazement, from your own feelings, gentlemen. For myself, I was literally stricken dumb and motionless. I seemed to be in a wild, reasonless nightmare, unable to move a foot or lift a hand. And, in good truth, there was little time given either of us for interfering, had we wished ever so badly to do so.

"The first rider drew rein as the second rider dashed out from cover and opened fire upon him. Then he threw up his arm and fired a single shot; but it was enough, for we saw the second rider drop his gun, throw up his arms, then fall from his saddle to the ground.

"That sight seemed to break the spell that bound us, for I cried out, and I heard my voice mingling with that of my friend. The victor in this curious duel also heard us. I suspect, for he at once turned tail and rode away as fast as his animal could carry him.

"I cried out to Frank to follow and take him in, then ran to get my own mount. When I came out of the grove, I saw Frank draw rein and leap down beside the fallen man."

"Because as I came up, he called out to me for help, and I could not pass by such an appeal. He said he was dying," tersely supplemented Frank Dymock.

"Well, I dashed past, thinking that Frank could attend to him as well as both of us, while I might possibly overtake the one who had laid him out so neatly," said Carlsworth, quietly.

"I kept on the chase for a good mile, but then drew in, seeing that I was only wasting time that might be better employed. He was going three feet to my two, and was already almost out of sight, heading for the broken ground to the north, where I knew he could easily give me the slip in the night.

"Convinced of this, I rode back to the grove, where I found Frank, doctoring the masked man as best he could. I say masked, for his face was still covered, and when I whispered to him, asking if he had made out who he was, the fellow himself answered me, his voice a curious mixture of pleading and menace.

"He begged that he might be permitted to keep his secret yet a little longer; it could do us no harm, and it would make his death a little easier if we would humor his whim.

"While he made this plea, I tried to place him by his voice, but either it was cunningly disguised, changed by coming through the mask, or altered by the near approach of death; for long and intimately as I have known Dike Roberts, I never once suspected that it could be him. Nor did I know who the man really was, until you, Mr. Fee, removed the mask and let the light fall upon his face!"

"You granted his request, then?"

"As that of a dying man, we did," was the grave reply.

"He was shot through the left breast. It was impossible that he could long survive. Indeed, it was a marvel to me that he ever drew a conscious breath after receiving that heavy ball so close to his heart, let alone lasting as long as he did!"

"We told him that he was dying, and begged him to explain what it all meant—to confess why he had ambushed the other Masked Mark—to make a clean confession of the whole perplexing mystery, in short—but he flatly refused to do so at that time, at least.

"He said that he had passed his word to join the meeting at Stokeley's, and he begged us to take him there, dead or alive. He said that he had a stern duty to perform before he could die; that he must speak the truth before all those gathered at Stokeley's, who could bear witness to his confession when it was ended and the time of need came for it.

"We told him that it would be impossible for him to live long enough—that any attempt to remove him from that spot would surely hasten his death; that he had better tell us all he had to say, and we would see that his last wishes were carried out to the very letter."

Barry paused, his keen dark eyes fixed upon the pale face of Colonel Victor Vanderlyn, who just then made a sudden move forward. And there were those in the gathering who saw that the hands of the two friends moved toward their revolvers.

CHAPTER XV.

HOW A CORPSE KEPT ITS APPOINTMENT.

WAS Colonel Victor Vanderlyn one of those who saw the movement made by those hands? And did he rightly interpret the meaning thus conveyed? It may be; and yet, if he had really intended trouble, he covered his change of purpose with a rare tact.

He hesitated, paused, brushing one hand across his pale face, pushing down his collar as though he was choking. A muttered word or two fell from his lips, and turning abruptly to the counter behind which Clem Stokeley kept his liquors, very limited as to variety, but in great abundance, such as it was, he passed behind the bar and helped himself to a full tumbler of undiluted whisky. He swallowed this at a gulp, and repeated the dose without pausing to catch his breath. Then a long, free breath broke from his lungs, and he came from behind the counter, saying in a natural tone of voice:

"So much mystery made my throat feel like a red-hot lime-kiln! Marsh, slide into office and give the gentlemen what they prefer—want something I am sure they do, judging from my own sensations!"

The slow-moving giant obeyed as promptly as his nature would permit, and a number of the ranchers were prompt enough to improve the occasion. And each one of those who drank, as soon as his liquor was swallowed, fell back to positions near the colonel.

Was it chance, merely? Neither Barry Carlsworth nor Frank Dymock believed so, and with a quick interchange of glances they drew closer together, evidently prepared to make the best of what could hardly prove otherwise than a bad situation.

During the intermission thus brought about, the strange narrative was broken in upon, the two friends standing on one side of the table where the corpse of Dike Roberts lay. Almost opposite to them stood Demas Fee, his bruised face looking livid under the lamplight. In their front stood Jehudi Fee, his long arms folded over his breast, his stern, brilliant eyes riveted upon them as though doubting each word they uttered, and only waiting the proper time for tearing the mask from their faces, even as he had removed that from the face of his old friend, the squatter of Rackabout Range.

This was the situation when Colonel Vanderlyn spoke:

"Of course you convinced him—he made a full confession, which you took down, witnessed, signed, sealed, swore to, and as soon as he conveniently died, you hastened hither to deliver. Is that the programme, gentlemen?"

His tone was insolent, to an even greater degree than his words, and some among the gathering, knowing that the partners were both brave and quick-tempered men, moved hastily out of line, as though anticipating an interchange of hot lead.

Instead, Barry Carlsworth coldly replied to the colonel, as though a perfectly legitimate question had been asked:

"He refused to make anything like a confession—just then. He said he was determined to live until he could tell his story to the crowd assembled here, waiting for his coming. He said that he could not die without first clearing up all the mystery, so far as he was concerned, that had so excited Rackabout Range. If he should, he knew he could never lie easy in his grave."

The speaker ceased with these words, and his dark eyes rested on the face of the colonel, as though waiting for any further questions he might think fit to put; but there came none. The hard, defiant air assumed by the ex-soldier grew perceptibly softer, and the color began to come back into his face.

Was this because he dreaded to hear that Dike Roberts had made a full admission, or was it simply the effects of the double dose of strong liquor which he had swallowed?

Jehudi Fee made an impatient gesture.

"You are drawing out your explanation to an unconscionable length, Mr. Carlsworth. One could almost believe you were troubled to find the exact terms you think would best suit your purpose."

The young man flushed hotly as he felt the poisoned sting hidden within these cold words, but he maintained a firm grasp on his passions, and would not suffer them to get the upper hand, even for a moment.

"My nerves are not made of steel, Mr. Fee, and blood flows in my veins, instead of ice-water. If the events of this night have disturbed and shaken me, they have not made any difference in the plain facts, and however illy I

may express myself, it is the simple truth I am placing before you."

"The truth is just what we want most, but we want it with the least possible delay, that the cause of justice may not be wholly baffled," sharply added Jehudi Fee.

"The less frequent your interruptions, then, the sooner you will get at the bottom facts," interposed Frank Dymock, almost rudely, for he, unlike Barry Carlsworth, had no motive for shunning the ill will of the sour old cynic.

"We reasoned with the man," and Barry cast a side glance toward the corpse on the table, "but he would not listen to anything we might say. We told him that he was mortally shot; that his sands of life were rapidly running out, even as he lay thus quiet and in comparative comfort; that it would surely hasten the end were he to insist on being moved ever so little, much less all the way to Stokeley's; but it was all of no use."

"He said that he had pledged his word to attend the meeting called for that night at Stokeley's. He swore that he would keep his appointment, dead or alive, and that if his vow was frustrated by our means, he would haunt us both until the end of time, though the foul fiend should sink him to the lowest depths of hades!"

There was a shiver through the room as these fearful words were repeated in a cold, calm tone, and eyes glanced toward the corpse as though half-expecting to hear it rise up and bear witness to the vow.

"Very dramatic!" sneered Colonel Vanderlyn.

"But simple truth," was the quiet reply. "I am not here to create a silly sensation, but to tell the unadorned facts, in hopes of getting to the bottom of this mystery."

"And the person, big or little, officer or private, who hints that Barry Carlsworth has uttered aught more than the plain, unvarnished truth, is a liar in his throat!" sternly cried Frank Dymock, his dark eyes fixed upon the face of the colonel.

"If that is meant for me," coldly retorted Vanderlyn, "I never stop at a hint. I am listening to this strange story with growing interest, and when it is brought to a climax, I will deliver my opinion, if asked for, in plain terms."

"Friends and men of Rackabout Range!" cried Jehudi Fee, his voice harshly excited as he stood with hands uplifted, quivering as with the palsy, his thin face turning almost purple. "I call on you to aid me in keeping these hot-bloods in proper subjection. If fight they must, make them wait until we know just what has happened—just how Dike Roberts came by his death!"

Unpopular though the speaker undeniably was with the majority of those present, his sentiments struck them favorably, and a cry followed that warned all of danger to come should too much time be needlessly consumed.

"It was all in vain that we reasoned with the man whose lifeless body lies here," resumed Barry Carlsworth, his voice cold and steady. "He said that he would not die until he had kept his appointment. He said that there was a great and terrible secret which he wanted to publish to the men of Rackabout Range, where he would have plenty of good and trusty witnesses to his oath. And so, seeing that he would be content with no less, we caught his horse and made preparations to bring him here."

"He refused a litter, as to make one would consume too much precious time. He said he could ride, if we would tie him in the saddle and lead the horse over the smoothest trail. We felt that it would be certain death, under the circumstances, but how could we refuse? He swore he would curse us with his dying breath if we failed him then!"

"We stopped up his wound as best we could, and placed him in his saddle. We tied him there with his own lasso, and then, one walking on each side of him to steady his swaying form, we started for Stokeley's, on the most trying journey it was ever my fortune to make!"

Barry Carlsworth, his voice growing husky, brushed a hand across his face to remove the sweat that seemed to start out from every pore in large beads. His auditors thrilled as they noted his emotion. They glanced shyly toward the corpse on the table, who had kept its appointment after such a strange fashion.

The young ranchero steadied his voice, and resumed:

"It was well that we took these precautions, for before we covered half a mile, the wounded man gave out, as we then believed, dying, killed by the motion of his horse, careful as we had been in picking out the smoothest route."

"We hastily released him and lowered him to the ground. He was still alive, though insensible, his wound bleeding freely, the pellet of cloth having worked out by the motion of his animal. We worked over him for some little time, giving him brandy, stopping the bleeding, and then he revived sufficiently to curse us for lingering on the road! Cursed us if we stopped again before reaching Stokeley's! Swearing that we were in league with the black-hearted wretches whose evil schemes had brought him to the verge of the grave—that we were plotting to save the guilty and doom the innocent!"

"Coming even from a dying man, these were hard words and difficult to swallow; but we did the best we could for him. We again asked him to confide in us—to tell us what dark secret it was that urged him on to certain death—swearing to use his confession to the benefit of the innocent and the discomfiture of the guilty; but it was only breath wasted in vain. He would last until he reached Stokeley's. He would live long enough to expose the criminals and lay bare their atrocious plots. He would tell his story before the assembled men of Rackabout Range, unless we failed him."

"This was all he would say, save to urge us on, and seeing that no less would content him, we replaced him in the saddle and made what haste we durst, though we were forced to halt twice more before reaching the end. The last time was not over a quarter of a mile from here, and that time we thought for certain the end had come; but once more he rallied, and on we came, beginning to believe that some more than mortal power was aiding him to keep his appointment!"

"Not two hundred yards from this spot, he spoke, and his voice was steadier and stronger than it had been at any time since receiving his hurt. We believed him living when we opened the door. If not, he certainly could not have been dead more than a few seconds, at the outside."

"What a pity the poor fellow did not live a little longer!" uttered Colonel Vanderlyn, in a peculiar tone of voice. "If only long enough to bear witness to the truth of this wonderful account!"

"How long ago was it that he was shot?" interposed Jehudi Fee, his voice cold and hard.

"About two hours, I should say."

"Yet, less than half an hour ago, Masked Mark was standing here before us all, alive, hearty, unhurt! How do you explain that fact, Mr. Carlsworth?"

"I do not explain it, if it be the fact you say. I can only guess that the man who met you here was the same whom we saw waylaid by Dike Roberts—who shot him down after being fired upon, and then outran my horse."

"A very ingenious explanation, too, but I think there is still another and far more reasonable one," broke in Colonel Vanderlyn, his voice hard and almost insultingly suspicious. "Masked Mark was here, alive and in flesh. He proved himself a detective with full authority to arrest all or any law-breaker whom he might come across. He did arrest one—Alva Bohee."

"And lied in his throat when he called him a criminal!" cried Carlsworth, hotly. "Alva Bohee is my friend—our dear friend—and if he has been arrested as a criminal, there has been foul play going on here! If aught of harm has come to him, let those who hatched the cunning plot take care of their heads! We'll have revenge, though we have to wade through blood to our knees."

Frank Dymock touched his excited partner on the arm, and facing Colonel Vanderlyn he spoke sharply:

"What kind of looking man was this Masked Mark of yours? His size, dress and general description?"

Colonel Vanderlyn pointed at the body lying on the table and deliberately replied:

"Replace the mask that Jehudi Fee removed from that face. Blot out the red stain over his heart. Restore life to the body, speech to the tongue, motion to the limbs. Set him on his feet beside the table, and you see a perfect counterpart of the person you are so curious about. And such a marvelously similar representation, that one could almost take oath they were one and the same person!"

"Is Colonel Victor Vanderlyn ready to take oath that the two men are one and the same?" coldly uttered Dymock, his dark eyes glittering, his face pale and hard-set.

"Colonel Vanderlyn said almost, I believe," was the cool retort of the ex-soldier.

"And Colonel Vanderlyn shows his usual prudence when he hesitates to swear to a lie!" pointedly exclaimed Carlsworth. "I am willing to take oath that this man—in the disguise which has made its wearer known all over Rackabout Range as Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective—has not been out of our sight for more than two hours. If Colonel Vanderlyn, or any other person now present, doubts my oath, he has only to say as much, and I will try my level best to teach him better manners—besides sending him where he can put the question to Dike Roberts, in spirit, if not in the flesh."

It was a pointed challenge, tipped with poison for the express benefit of the colonel, but once more Jehudi Fee interposed and prevented what bade fair to become a fatal collision. He whipped out a heavy revolver, cocking it with the air of one who meant stern business as he cried:

"Peace! There shall be peace here until this horrible mystery is settled satisfactorily, or I'll do part of the fighting! I swear to shoot without mercy the first man among you all who lifts a hand to strike a blow! You know me, gentlemen. Take warning, while there is yet time."

Colonel Vanderlyn laughed softly, but made no effort to draw a weapon. Barry Carlsworth

maintained his defiant attitude, but his hands, also, were empty of weapons.

"I am not hunting for a quarrel, neighbor," the colonel said, more quietly than ever, his huge mustaches curling as if with a smile. "But at the same time, I can't help thinking of what will be said when this remarkable story gets wild and outsiders catch hold of it. It will be very difficult for them to swallow two Masked Marks. If one of these two is accounted for," with a slight wave of his hand toward the table on which lay the corpse of Dike Roberts, "there is still one-half of the masquerade missing. And if this second edition of the Mounted Detective never comes to light—if Masked Mark in the flesh should never be heard of again—what will they say?"

"That Masked Mark arrested the particular friend of two well-known gentlemen; that those same gentlemen bring in the corpse of a masked man, the very image of the one whom all of the rest of us saw arrest their friend; that they set their beloved friend and ally free, at the cost of blood!"

A low buzz ran around the room as the colonel ceased speaking. His words had produced the precise effect he most desired. It was a cunning picture he drew, and without positively committing himself, he induced a belief that the two men had really committed murder in setting their friend free from arrest, then seeking to clear their skirts by a cunningly arranged story of a double Masked Mark.

The two partners saw this, but even then they did not flinch from before the stern, almost threatening frowns which turned upon them from all sides of the room. And when Barry Carlsworth spoke, his voice was cold and steady as at first:

"Do you reason after this fashion, Colonel Vanderlyn? Do you say that we murdered Masked Mark?"

"With that revolver covering me? After the stern threat which our good neighbor has uttered?" laughed the colonel, bowing toward Jehudi Fee. "No, I thank you, Mr. Carlsworth. I can only take oath that I saw Masked Mark alive and in sound bodily health in this room; that I heard him accuse Alva Bohee of counterfeiting and stock-stealing; that I saw him make the arrest, and leave with his prisoner. I can only swear that he was alive when he left here. That you two gentlemen brought a perfect counterpart of the man we all saw and heard speak—save that your Masked Mark was dead, a bullet through his heart, his body still warm, but his lips motionless, unable to either confirm or contradict your account of the curious affair. Only this, and nothing more, gentlemen!" he concluded, with a low and mocking bow.

"Don't be too sure of that, Colonel Vanderlyn," interposed Frank Dymock, his voice stern and significant, his demeanor giving no signs that he either noticed or was affected by the sullen mutterings and darkening looks of the excited men of Rackabout Range. "Possibly the dead may be brought to bear witness, after all!"

Colonel Vanderlyn gave a barely perceptible start, but instantly covered it with a short, contemptuous laugh.

"You both swore that Dike Roberts died without revealing his secret—if any such ever existed."

Once more Jehudi Fee interposed.

"Enough—and far too much—of this, gentlemen!" he sternly cried, one bony hand gently touching the cold forehead of the dead man. "You are wasting time in idle bickering that should be better employed. A man has been slain—murdered, I fear—and that man is my old and tried friend, Dike Roberts. I have known him too long, loved him too dearly, to be content to stand idle while his slayer is still at liberty."

"If these gentlemen have spoken the truth—and it is not for me to say they have done the contrary, strange and almost incredible as their report appears—that slayer must have been the man who appeared before us as Masked Mark and placed one of our number under arrest. He must have committed the murder before coming here."

"If he committed it at all," interjected Vanderlyn.

"There is only one way to solve all doubts, and that is by following his trail and capturing him, by bringing him back here and confronting him with these two gentlemen. The death of my old friend lies between the two parties, and by all my hopes of a hereafter, I'll never know rest or quiet until the mystery is solved and the murder fully avenged!"

The gaunt, hard old man looked almost inspired as he held one hand toward heaven, the other resting lightly on the cold face of his dead friend.

For a few seconds thus, then he spoke again, his voice sharp and business-like:

"Friends and neighbors—men of Rackabout Range! I appeal to you as men and brothers! I ask you to join with me in this search—to take the trail of Masked Mark and never leave it until the manner in which our old friend came by his death is fully discovered! Will you do it?"

There was a prompt response from a number of voices; but when the first wild outburst subsided, Barry Carlsworth said:

"Men of Rackabout Range, if you owe a debt to the dead, you also owe one to the living! One of your number has basely insinuated—that he dared not openly assert—that the account I have given you of this strange night's work is but little better than an ingeniously-concocted lie—that instead of bringing the dead man from the Jump-off, we waylaid him in another direction, and murdered him for the sake of setting a friend free from arrest."

"I simply said that that was the view most people would be inclined to take of the very peculiar affair," corrected Colonel Vanderlyn, with an ironical bow.

"And made your dastardly thought all the more despicable by shading it with a mask so thin and transparent," was the cold, cutting retort.

"Men of Rackabout Range, I again ask you to follow me to solve this devilish mystery!" cried Jehudi Fee, striding toward the door. "Get your horses and come on, all ye who lay the slightest claim to manhood! A friend and neighbor has been foully assassinated! It is for us to discover the real criminal, and to punish him as his crime deserves!"

"And I call upon all honorable men to follow us on our back trail, to see that we have spoken the simple truth!" cried Barry Carlsworth, sternly, emphatically.

"That while doing so, the duplicate Masked Mark may escape? That Alva Bohee may succeed in getting clear? No, men of Rackabout Range; I say follow the lead of Jehudi Fee!"

CHAPTER XVI.

"FIRST THE TOOL, AND THEN THE MASTER."

"THERE are enough in the company to divide and try both plans," interposed Demas Fee, who had maintained an unusual silence for him during the excited discussion or altercation. "We want to get at the bottom facts, and in the quickest manner possible. After that, you fellows can settle your little disputes after your own fashion."

"Find Alva Bohee, and the mystery is solved, be sure of that!" sharply cried the colonel.

"Are you right sure you want the mystery solved, Colonel Victor Vanderlyn?" swiftly interjected Frank Dymock.

Even in that moment of confusion and intense excitement, when the gathering was plainly dividing against itself, one part preparing to follow the lead of Jehudi Fee, without stopping to even weigh the other consideration, a part hesitating with their minds about equally balanced, there were some who noticed how hard this question seemed to hit the big ex-soldier. They saw him turn from red to white, visibly shrinking, though he almost instantly recovered himself. And seeing this they resolved to give the two young ranchers a chance for justifying themselves for which they asked.

"Sure?" echoed the colonel, with a short, forced laugh. "If you two gentlemen only show yourselves as eager as I am to get at the bottom of this singular affair, you will stand higher in the public estimation than you do now—be sure of that! It is to keep from being hamboozled that I opposed your proposition. I believe that the whole truth will never come out until Alva Bohee is found and brought up to the rack!"

"If you really believed that, you would be the last man in the company to advise following his trail—and you know it, Colonel Vanderlyn!" sternly cried Barry Carlsworth, shaking off the hand which Frank Dymock placed warningly upon his shoulder, confronting the giant with fierce hatred and defiance flaming in his blue eyes.

Once again did Jehudi Fee interpose his tall, gaunt figure to prevent what bade fair to be a death-grapple between the men who were each one seeking to win his daughter for a wife. In this fact, probably, lay his influence over them. Any other man could hardly have dared their wrath and come off so often without a scratch to show for it.

"For the last time I appeal to you to do justice to the poor man who lies on yonder table, a victim some ruthless hand has laid low in death!" he sternly cried, glancing rapidly from one face to the other. "He who hangs back now can never call himself friend of mine! He who fails me now, fails me for all time to come!"

Demas Fee, no longer the reckless, rowdyish youth in tone or action, caught his parent by the arm and hurriedly said:

"Father, there are enough men ready to follow you and that trail to an end, even if a part pursue their investigations in a different quarter. Both trails must be examined sometime if we hope to get at the bottom facts, and why not save time by doing them both at the same moment?"

"That is all we ask, gentlemen," added Frank Dymock, "but we ask it as a right which you cannot deny. If not in so many words, Carlsworth and I have been accused of lying, of murdering the man who took away our friend. We declare this a foul lie, vile as the brain that

evolved it or the lips that hissed forth the hint their owner was too cowardly to put in plain words. We say that our story can be verified in every detail by following our back trail before anything can wipe it out or devilish malignancy can lay a false one. We demand, by right, that at least a portion of you investigate our claims, and that among the number Colonel Victor Vanderlyn be included."

"If I decline to be so bulldozed?"

"You can have but one motive in refusing," was the cold and measured retort. "If sincere, you would jump at the chance to settle your doubts. If you decline, it is because you know you have tried to maliciously influence the crowd against us by hinting what you dared not put into plain speech."

For once Demas Fee took the lead, stepping before the big ex-soldier, his hands on his shoulders, his eyes filled with a hard and almost menacing light, his voice sharp and stern:

"You've got to go, Vanderlyn. Those who know your record will never believe you were forced into it through fear. And when the task is fairly finished, there will be time enough to call these two bold talkers to account. I'm going and you've got to keep me company—that's flat!"

"If you put it that way, all right," muttered the colonel in a cooler tone, visibly calming down.

Demas Fee turned toward his father, who was moodily looking on, his head bowed, biting viciously at his thumb-nail.

"Father, you lead those who prefer to follow you on the trail of the man whom we saw depart with Alva Bohee. It may be that the two trails will come together before you think. If not, I know you will never drop off until the truth is discovered, or all hope is lost in that quarter."

Without a word of reply, Jehudi Fee turned and strode out of the room, where a number of ranchers had already mounted their horses, ready and impatient for the trail. He leaped into his saddle, and with ferret-like Tip Stokeley in advance, on foot, with a lantern in his hand, leaning far over and lifting the plainly imprinted trail of the single horse which had borne both captor and prisoner away from the scene of arrest, that division of the party rode off, almost before the other moiety had fairly emerged from the building.

"We want all the witnesses we can get," said Frank Dymock, as he tapped big, sluggish Marsh Stokeley on the shoulder and hustled him into a saddle, almost before the slow-thinking giant could divine his purpose.

Then, as though it was too much trouble to argue the case or even declare his neutrality, Marsh rode on with the rest of the party in silence.

Barry Carlsworth and Demas Fee carried lighted lanterns by the aid of which the trail could readily be lifted, or, in case of necessity, thoroughly scrutinized. Frank Dymock was in the saddle, leading the horse belonging to his partner, while Colonel Vanderlyn performed the same service for young Fee.

The two trailers proceeded on foot, paying little attention to the ground until fairly clear of the thickly trampled soil immediately adjoining the tavern or storehouse. Indeed, Barry Carlsworth led the way direct to the point where he said they had halted for the last or third time with the wounded man in the mask.

"Gentlemen, you will please not crowd us too close," he uttered in warning, as his pace slackened. "You can come near enough to see, but until Mr. Fee expresses himself fully satisfied, there must be no trampling over the sign."

It was a perfectly reasonable demand, and not even Colonel Vanderlyn ventured to counter it. Indeed, the ex-soldier had fallen into a fit of silence in strong contrast to the volubility which marked the last few minutes spent in Stokeley's. Possibly the effects of his double dose of whisky were wearing off.

"One moment, Mr. Fee," said Carlsworth, restraining the impatient young man. "Let me recall the part of our story which is connected with this point in the trail, before—"

"I've not forgotten a single word," curtly interposed Demas, showing his teeth in a hard smile. "You said that here Dike Roberts gave out for the third time."

"Precisely. That we took him from the saddle to restore him, if possible. Now please take a look at the ground, and see if it will not bear out our story, thus far."

Demas Fee promptly acted on this hint, leaving Carlsworth standing with his lantern at the head of the investigating company. Bending low, the young man, really no slouch at reading a trail, threw the full light of his lantern on the ground where he could see the plain imprints of three horses, seeming to have passed that point abreast. On looking more carefully, he could detect footprints here and there, on each side of the trail made by the center horse, as though a man had walked close alongside, to support a third in the saddle.

A few paces further along, he came to the first bloody sign as yet discovered, and a sharp ejaculation escaped his lips as he bent still lower over the ground. He was heard by those who

were so eagerly watching his movements, and there was an impulsive movement as though they would press forward to the more quickly learn the truth; but clear and menacing rung out the voice of Barry Carlsworth, as he barred their way with cocked and leveled revolver.

"Hold back, gentlemen, and give everybody concerned fair play. It's no trifling amount at stake, but the honor, perhaps life, of two men. Keep your places until Demas Fee says he's seen enough, or, by the stars above our heads! I'll lay some of you flat on your backs for good and all!"

"Just consider I've repeated the warning and the vow, to save time and breath, gentlemen!" came in the stern voice of Frank Dymock, and in the place of one revolver, there were now three at a level.

Possibly less emphatic terms would have answered the same purpose, but the two men felt that they had too much at stake to run any unnecessary risks. They meant every word they uttered, and the men of Rackabout Range were wise enough to see this. They remained quiet, even those who had shown the most eagerness to press forward.

Their patience was not long tried. Demas Fee could see plainly enough out of his swollen and blackened eyes. He saw that thus far the story told by Barry Carlsworth at Stokeley's was plainly true. There had been a halt at this point for some little time, judging from the plentiful "sign."

He could see where a body had been lowered to the grass-covered ground, and close beside the imprint was a little pool of blood, now coagulated and covered with a film as he gingerly touched it with his finger. He picked up a tightly rolled bit of cotton cloth, which was soaked with blood as though it had been used to plug up a bullet-hole.

Satisfied thus far, Demas Fee made a little cast, passing around the outside of the circle cut up more or less by trampling hoofs, and then stooping lower, he ran along for a few yards in a direct line. He rose erect and retraced his steps, pausing when close to the main party.

"Well, what have you found out?" hastily asked Vanderlyn.

"Nothing but what goes to prove the truth of the story you all heard back there at Stokeley's," was the ready reply. "A body was placed on the grass, and the spot of blood shows that whoever it was, he had been badly hurt."

"The distance is not so great but that Masked Mark might have covered it with his prisoner, in the interval. Our doors were shut, and we were talking so busily shots might have been fired here, without attracting our attention. You see, Demas, your proofs may be interpreted in more ways than one!" uttered Colonel Vanderlyn, with a short, hard laugh.

"Wait until the end of the trail is reached, before you commit yourself too utterly, colonel," coldly retorted Barry Carlsworth, with more composure than might have been expected under the circumstances.

"And that is mighty good advice, too!" nodded Demas Fee, with emphasis. "I have the use of both my wits and my eyesight. I know that there has been no death-struggle at this spot, and I have found the trail where it led direct to the place where the wounded man fell or was helped from the saddle. Keep at a decent distance behind us, please, gentlemen, and we will see what more there is to be made out."

As a general thing, Demas Fee was but little better than an echo to the stronger-willed ex-soldier, but with the death of the man whom he had hoped to one day call father-in-law, a sudden and complete change had come over him. He seemed to lose sight of all else in his fierce longing to learn just how and by whom that death had been brought about.

In the gloom Colonel Vanderlyn tugged at his huge mustaches, his brows corrugated, his eyes glowing wickedly. It was clear enough that this alteration did not wholly please him.

Once more Demas Fee and Barry Carlsworth led the way along the trail, the latter simply lending the light of the lantern which he carried allowing his companion to pick out the trail. No very difficult task, for the most part. It led across a tract of country where there were but few hard or stony patches, the fresh grass serving to receive and retain the hoofprints with unmistakable distinctness.

And as they rode on further from Stokeley's the brows of the colonel came closer together, and he tugged still more viciously at his mustaches. He saw that he must take some other line if he hoped to carry the day against the two young men whom he hated with all the ardor of his fiery nature. He saw that his comrades were becoming convinced that it was highly improbable, if not absolutely impossible, for the Masked Mark who had stood in their presence and arrested Alva Bohee, to have ridden thus far to meet his death and he carried back to Stokeley's by the two men, during the few minutes between his exit and the dramatic entrance of the Masked Mark who turned out to be none other than Dike Roberts.

He could hear them muttering together as

they rode on a little in the rear of the men with the lanterns, and asking each other who could the second Masked Mark be, should their steadily growing belief prove true. If the man who placed Alva Bohee under arrest, was the genuine Masked Mark, why had the old squatter assumed the same disguise? Where had he gotten that disguise? What part had he meant to play that night at Stokeley's? Who was it he was so determined to meet and expose? What the great secret he wished to reveal before them all, that they might bear witness? Witness to what?

These, and many other questions were passed back and forth by the members of the party following the two trailers; but Colonel Vanderlyn asked none, nor did he attempt to give an answer to any.

There were two more breaks in the trail before the noted landmark of the "Jump-off" was reached. Each one was indicated by Barry Carlsworth just before they were reached, and Demas Fee advanced alone to make his careful examination, just as we have seen him act in the first instance. Each time he made a thorough examination, convincing himself beyond all doubt that he fully understood the situation before he would permit any of the party to advance.

And each time he distinctly stated that thus far the "sign" fully corroborated the story told by Barry Carlsworth of that strange night's ride.

At length the vicinity of the actual tragedy was reached and Barry Carlsworth called a halt for a few moments.

"Gentlemen, the end is almost reached, and if you choose to dismount and tie your horses, or leave them in charge of some of your number, you can hear Mr. Fee company while he is reading the sign. It is hoof-marks that must tell the greater part of the story, and if you ride over the ground, the difficulty of getting at all the truth will be greatly increased."

There could be no dissent made to this fair proposition, and in silence the men of Rackabout Range alighted, securing their animals for the most part to the scrubby bushes that fringed the base of the Jump-off.

This was a peculiar feature, visible for miles around. A long ridge of rock, on one side sloping gradually back to the general level of the country about, but on the other rising to the height of perhaps a hundred feet, then ending in a perpendicular precipice of solid rock, bare and chalky white. This curious wall extended for nearly a mile in either direction, keeping an almost straight line for that distance, when it gradually sloped down to meet the level plain.

Less than a hundred yards from its base, stood the little grove of trees where Barry Carlsworth said he had been waiting for the coming of his partner, and to this point Demas Fee first led the way, followed at a little distance by the men.

Barry Carlsworth silently pointed out the spot where he had hitched his horse when he stole forth to meet and caution Frank Dymock, lest he alarm the supposed animal in the *coulée*.

Next the *coulée* itself was examined, and the spot where a horse had been hitched for some little time was discovered. The lights showed where a footman had mounted and then ridden out on the level at full speed for a few rods, the horse's hoofs deeply scoring the ground where it leaped abruptly to one side. And there the trailers saw a considerable pool of coagulated blood.

"You can see here where Frank came up and leaped from his horse, letting it go free. It ran a few yards, then fell to grazing," tersely explained Barry Carlsworth, pointing out each sign as he mentioned them. "Here I dashed past in pursuit of the man who dropped Dike Roberts. And here, you see where the horseman halted to fire, then turn and flee. And if you care to follow the double trail, you will find my story corroborated to the very letter."

"It seems plain enough, that's so!" muttered Demas Fee.

"But is it?" harshly interposed Colonel Vanderlyn. "Is it just as it appears? True, we have seen sign that tells us a man was ambushed by another, who evidently came out of the *coulée*, but what surety have we that the old man was the one who laid in wait? The sign seems to prove it, but sign have been manufactured ere now, and the truth twisted in a lie."

"Touch a little lightly, colonel, on that point," said Barry Carlsworth, coldly. "You are satisfied that there was an ambush?"

"That the sign seems to show there was, say."

"Let it go at that. If a man was to ambush another, it is only reasonable to presume that he meant him some sort of mischief. You all saw the tracks leading out of the *coulée*. They were made by a man on horseback, riding at full speed. The trail leads straight along until the horse leaps aside, its tracks showing that it was frightened by the fall of its rider. Even you can hardly have cheek enough to deny this, Colonel Vanderlyn?"

"When I see better what you are driving at, I'll answer."

"Mr. Fee, you closely scanned the tracks lead-

ing out of the *coulée*. Did you notice any peculiarity about them?"

"Broken shoe on the left forefoot; hind feet bare, the near hoof having a bit broken from the outside shell," was the prompt response.

"Call up Marsh Stokeley, and ask him to ride the same horse he rode here from the house," added Carlsworth.

In obedience to the call, the sluggish giant approached the party, dismounting at a word from Carlsworth.

"You rode this horse from the tavern, I believe?"

"Sart'in; he told me to do it," with a nod toward Dymock.

"Because I expected something of this kind," the party indicated quietly replied. "Examine the animal, gentlemen."

Demas Fee did so, finding the broken shoe and the chipped hoof to exactly correspond with the marks left near the end of the *coulée*. To make all things sure, the horse was led to the spot, and the telltale marks carefully compared with the tracks in the soft soil.

"That settles it!" ejaculated Demas Fee, rising erect once more. "It's the same horse beyond a doubt!"

"But how do these tracks show it is the horse ridden by Dike Roberts? True, a man was shot here, but who can prove that he was killed? A man was ambushed, and fled. Who can say that he was not followed and killed? Who can swear he was not our old friend, Dike Roberts?"

"There are enough here to swear to this horse," steadily replied Carlsworth. "They saw him bear Roberts to the house. You can see his life-blood still staining the saddle. You saw one of your strongest partisans follow the trail back to this spot, without break or fault. If this is not proof enough to convince any right-minded man—"

"Holy Moses! jes' looky yender!" roared Marsh Stokeley, staggering back in dreadful fright, his hat falling off as though pushed from his head by his bristling hair, his eyes wildly protruding, his teeth chattering like castanets as he pointed with one trembling hand toward the crest of the not far distant Jump-off.

Instantly all eyes were turned in that direction, and as they beheld what had so awakened his superstitious terror, more than one heart among the party gave one choking jump, then seemed to cease its functions.

On the very edge of the perpendicular stone wall, they beheld a horseman, fully facing them as they stood revealed by the clear moonlight. A horseman, but so lighted up by a bluish glow that seemed to issue from its own breast, that it looked more a spectral apparition than aught of mortal build!

And as they stared, spellbound, a deep, awe-inspiring voice came floating through the air to their startled hearing:

"First the tool, and then the master! Beware, Victor Vanderlyn! Your race is nearly run! Your hour of doom is nigh!"

With a fierce curse the colonel flung up one hand and fired a shot; before he could do more, the light died out and the strange figure, mortal or phantom, vanished from sight.

"It is a cursed trick! To horse, men of Rackabout Range! A thousand dollars to the one who kills or captures him! It is that infernal Masked Mark!" cried Vanderlyn, fiercely.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MYSTERY PARTIALLY EXPOSED.

AY! Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective!

Others besides Victor Vanderlyn were quick to recognize in this spectral-appearing horseman, the same individual who had met them at Stokeley's, and who had carried one of their number off with him when he left.

By the blue light, which seemed to center in the bosom of the figure on the cliff, the startled men of Rackabout Range could distinguish his dress, could make out the cunning mask and flowing beard—just such as they had seen removed from the death-chilled face of Dike Roberts as he lay on the round table in the center of the bar-room at Stokeley's!

They could also make out the marks of the horse—a fine blood-bay, seemingly in every respect a counterpart of the one which big Marsh Stokeley had ridden thither.

Some viewed the weird spectacle with wonder, some with a thrill of superstitious awe; but there was a strange mingling of both, combined with hatred bitter as death, in the hoarse, strained tones of Colonel Vanderlyn as he jerked forth a revolver, firing one shot at the spectral horseman before it disappeared so silently.

"A thousand dollars for him, dead or alive!" Split, and run the bloody assassin down! Kill your animals, but don't let the cunning cur have the laugh on us again!"

Shouting thus, the ex-soldier ran to where his horse was tethered, followed more or less eagerly by the entire party. He leaped into the saddle, and with another wild, almost incoherent appeal to the men of Rackabout Range, he dashed off to the right along the base of the jump-off.

There were some of the company who had become about disgusted with the manner in which

the big man had conducted himself that night, and though they showed sufficient willingness to join in the hunt as the shortest method of getting at the actual facts of that strange night's adventures, they were reluctant to follow his lead. And so, when Barry Carlsworth and Frank Dymock chose to take the course directly opposite to the one pursued by Vanderlyn, they did not lack for allies.

Close beside Colonel Vanderlyn rode Demas Fee, his face hard-set and evil-looking, though the friendly shade which lay along the base of the rocky precipice towering so far above them, concealed this from all but him. But when Vanderlyn gripped his arm and pressed it firmly, leaning across in the saddle to whisper a few hasty words, some of his powerful passions were exhibited in his answer.

"Spur the hot-heads on to kill or capture that demon!" muttered the colonel in tones that none save his comrade could distinguish above the rapid clatter of their horses' hoofs on the rocky soil. "Set them going, tail-on-end—then drop out with me. The wheels are all turning the wrong way, and if we don't look out, we'll go to eternal smash with the whole thing!"

"After I get my grip on that hell-hound! After I settle for the murder of Jessie's father!" grated Demas, savagely.

"You idiot!" and that grip tightened until it threatened to break the bone even as it was cruelly bruising the flesh. "He couldn't have done it! Either Carlsworth or Dymock shot the old man—I can prove it to you. You've got to go with me to the roost—it means life or death, I tell you!"

Now, as in most cases, the stronger will prevailed, and with a sulky, ill-omened growl, Demas Fee yielded.

The colonel played the part he had set himself to perfection. He did not give his men time to think over the great improbability of their ever catching up with Masked Mark, when they had to ride nearly a mile before they could turn the end of the Jump-off, and then as far back before striking the trail left by the spectral horseman. He urged them on with liberal offers of gold. He exhorted them to spare no efforts to avenge the murder of their old friend, the squatter. And then, as the rocky range sloped sufficiently for them to round it, he cried:

"You make for the point where we saw the demon last, and take his trail. Fee and I will try to cut him off this way."

He did not wait for answer or any comments, but rode swiftly off in the moonlight, Demas Fee keeping close to his side. The rest of the party sped on along the brink, apparently unsuspecting the actual fact—that they were deserted by the man who had acted as their chief!

For only a few moments did Colonel Vanderlyn follow the proper course to cut off the mysterious horseman. He began bearing to the right almost immediately, and before the rest of the party were fairly out of sight, he turned the head of his horse toward Stokeley's.

"You've given up all thoughts of taking that devil?" Demas Fee uttered, sulkily, but still following the lead of the ex-soldier.

"For the present, yes. We've got other fish to fry, and we'll be in mighty big luck if we don't find all the fat upset into the fire, work as brisk as we may!" the colonel replied, a fierce imprecation hissing through his teeth.

"Then you think—"

"Isn't it clear enough, curse you?" was the savage interruption. "Do you need an electric lamp hanging to the end of your nose, to show you that the devil and all his imps are at work against us? Isn't it clear enough that the little job we set up on Alva Bohee has leaked out in some manner? If not, how comes it that another fellow carries it out, while the old man gets knocked on the head?"

"If I only knew who really downed him, I'd snap my fingers at all the rest!" growled Demas, his thoughts going back to the little red-headed girl living in the rough lands all alone, perhaps even then looking for her father, wondering why he lingered!

"It's a rope we'll need to snap, and that with our bare necks, you idiot!" growled the colonel, turning in his saddle and flashing a venomous glance at the younger man. "Curse the girl and your calf-love! Throw all such silly thoughts to the wind, and get down to sober business—*coulée*!"

Demas Fee made no reply, and on they rode at a rapid pace until the dim outlines of Stokeley's came into view. Then the colonel leaped to the ground, throwing his reins to Demas Fee.

"Wait until I give you the signal to come on. I'll make sure the coast is clear, first," he muttered, gliding rapidly and noiselessly toward the building.

He peered in at the partly-opened door, finding only the old couple, Clem and Polly Stokeley. He uttered a faint whistle that brought the skeleton virago to the door, then whispered:

"All clear, Polly? No one around but you two?"

"Nary one, boss," was the prompt reply. "You tuck off one lot, an' the ole preacher rid away with the other. They hain't none on 'em come back, 'cept jes' you."

Swiftly her tongue rattled away, and there is no saying when the end would have been reached had the colonel allowed that nimble member full play.

"All right. We're going into the work-room."

He turned and repeated his whistle in a louder tone, and Demas Fee presently rode up, leading the colonel's horse. At a sign he dismounted, throwing the reins over a post near by, then followed Vanderlyn into the house.

Without noticing the corpulent old cripple, Vanderlyn passed behind the bar, taking a box of cigars and a couple of bottles of liquor from the shelf. With these under his arm, he nodded for Polly to move along.

She understood his temper too well to delay or to ask any questions. Following her lead, the two men passed from the bar-room into a sort of kitchen and dining-room combined, where the living skeleton sunk upon her knees in one corner, her long, bony fingers busily at work. There came two or three sharp clicks as her long finger-nails drew out as many nails from the wood, and rising, a touch of one foot caused a portion of the flooring to turn as on a pivot.

This revealed a dark, pit-like opening, and the boards evidently formed the covering to a secret entrance to the work-room mentioned by the colonel.

The contrivance was an ingenious one. Instead of being regular in outline, as trap doors generally are, this one had broken joints at each end, just as a floor is laid, though this portion of the room seemed to have been finished with the remnants left over from the rest of the flooring.

Polly lit a lamp standing near on a shelf, and gave it to Demas Fee, in accordance with the nod of the colonel. The latter said to her:

"You take our horses and hide them close to the other opening. Put nosebags on them both, with plenty to eat. Keep your eyes open, and if any one comes to the house, don't let on that we have returned, unless you know them to be true blue. There's stormy weather coming, and you'll suffer with the rest if you fail to keep your weather eye open—you understand?"

Without stopping for her answer, Colonel Vanderlyn dropped into the opening, stooping low to guard his head as he moved along a narrow tunnel for a few yards. Demas Fee followed after the same fashion, and held the light while the colonel passed his hands over a rough door of close-jointed puncheons set in the earth. This soon swung open and they emerged into a comparatively spacious apartment, lined and ceiled with hewn timbers, but with a floor of hardly packed dirt.

The apartment contained but little in the way of furniture; a rude table and several stools being about all in that line. In one corner was a rude stone forge of some sort. Near it, and covered over with heavy canvas, were tools and implements of different shapes, whose uses could only be guessed at without a closer inspection.

Directly opposite the door through which they had entered, was another of similar material, but so cunningly fitted into the wall that it would easily escape a casual scrutiny.

Placing cigars and bottles on the table, the colonel kicked a stool up to one side, dropping heavily upon it, his face an ugly representation of mingled rage, fear, doubt and ferocity as he tugged at his huge mustaches with blazing eyes fixed upon the bruised and swollen countenance of his companion.

"A devil of a fix, isn't it, old fellow?" he growled.

Demas Fee showed his teeth half-defiantly as he imitated the example set him by the colonel, only improving upon it by knocking off the top of a bottle against the end of the table and drinking heartily from the vessel thus opened.

"How can I tell?" he growled, sullenly, his bloodshot eyes glowing. "You've only half-trusted me. I don't know just what you expected to bring about, but I do know that the father of the girl I mean to make my wife has been killed. And I know that I'll get even with the hound that downed him, if it takes a leg!"

"Your neck is in greater danger than your leg, old fellow," laughed the colonel; but it was a laugh utterly devoid of anything like mirth. "It's hard luck, and the devil is surely in it all! And I could have taken oath all would work so smoothly! I felt so sure that everything was guarded—hell's blackest curses forever follow the hand that tangled up the wires I laid so carefully!"

He snatched up the bottle and drank greedily, hurling the empty vessel from him with a violence that shattered it into a hundred bits against the stone forge.

"What was it you meant, anyhow?" asked Demas Fee, his curiosity for the moment getting the upper hand of even his fierce longing for revenge. "You kept it a secret from me—"

"Because I feared you would let some hint drop in a dangerous quarter when you were drunk. Ever since that night—ever since Oren Bohee went over the range—you've been losing your real nerve, and seeking it in drink. I was afraid to let you in on the ground floor, until after the work was done."

"Well, I'm not sorry, the way things have

turned out," the younger man laughed, hardly. "If I'll have to bear a part of the consequences, at least I'm free from the curses. They properly belong to you, my gentle lad!"

"It's no laughing matter, Fee," was the gloomy retort.

"I can tell better when I know more," significantly.

"All right!" with a reckless lighting up of his gloomy features, as he leaned back and lit a cigar. "You shall know the whole job—as far as I'm concerned. There's a part of it that I'd give my left hand to fully comprehend!"

"First, you know why Oren Bohee was put out of the way. For one thing, he was making himself too numerous. He was trying to pry into secrets which did not concern him in the least, and he even went so far as to send word to the governor that there were gentlemen within the limits of Rackabout Range who would prove well worth a special examination by the minions of the law—you know this, old fellow?"

Demas nodded, his bruised face turning a shade or two paler, as though the thoughts awakened were far from pleasant.

"Let the rest of it pass, then. After Oren, came Alva, and if he pulled the wool over most eyes, he didn't altogether over mine. I knew that he was playing the same sort of scheme as his brother, though after a still more dangerous fashion."

"Why did you hold my hand, then, to-day, when I had him foul and was ready to down him for good and all?" snarled Demas.

"Partly to save you from a troublesome investigation, and probably lynching picnic, but mainly because I believed that the Parson was certainly doomed, after a fashion that would leave our skirts entirely clear of smut or stain."

"Now you must know that I held Dike Roberts under my thumb so securely that he only drew breath with my permission. Never mind just what that hold was; enough that I had it, and he was ready to obey my slightest wink or nod so long as I kept his secret to myself. Only for that hold, my boy, he'd have openly favored the Parson when he came courting the girl, and have sent you off about your business with a flea in your ear."

"I don't believe it!"

"All the same, it's gospel truth. As a partial proof, I had only to tell Dike Roberts that he must solve the mystery of this infernal Masked Mark for me, to set him to work. He lost no time, and only the day before yesterday he came to me with a very interesting report."

"He had discovered the place the Mounted Detective used for his dressing-room! In proof, he brought with him the same canning mask which you saw your father take from his dead face only a few hours ago!"

"I thought he couldn't be the real Masked Mark!" muttered the younger rascal. "You meant for him to play the part the simon-pure Masked Mark played with Alva Bohee?"

"You've hit the center, Demas, first shot. We had a talk together night before last, and another last night, when the full details were arranged. He was to send me the message I read to the men. I prepared his papers for him so that the square portion of the company wouldn't smell a mice. I felt sure that I would be selected as one of the committee; your father was to be another; and with Dick Morton, even if the old man should suspect something, we could overrule him."

"Then father wasn't in the game?"

"No. You know that. He's not an angel for meekness, nor a lump of sugar for sweetness; but when it comes to bull-headed honesty, the old gent is all there!" laughed Vanderlyn, with a thinly-disguised sneer in his tones.

"Better for us if we were more like him!" muttered Fee.

Vanderlyn frowned a little at this evidence of what he deemed weakness, but was wise enough to let it pass without making any comments. In that critical stage of the game, he could not afford to run any risks of alienating an ally.

"From what happened up-stairs, you can readily guess the programme as we laid it out. From first to last—until Masked Mark took his departure with Alva Bohee in irons, a prisoner—everything went off exactly as we planned it; and I had not even the ghost of a doubt that all was well until those fellows brought Dike Roberts inside, a dead man!"

"You say you discussed your plans twice over; where at?"

"Once in my own room, the last time—last night, that was—near your house, in the grove."

"And there you made the first false step, of course! Some one must have overheard you talking—no doubt the real man with the hidden face!"

"It may be," slowly, thoughtfully. "That is the easiest way to explain the affair, I admit, and yet—I can't bring myself to believe it! We were so careful and took so much pains to keep to ourselves, that—"

"What matter?" with a hard laugh. "It did leak out, and as a consequence Dike Roberts is dead; Alva Bohee is out of our reach; we are at least suspected of crooked work by Barry Carlsworth and Frank Dymock; and the real Masked

Mark is alive and at liberty to make it hot for us and the gang!"

Colonel Vanderlyn knocked the neck off the other bottle, and took a drink. He pushed the bottle across to his comrade, then spoke, his voice hard and full of meaning:

"He don't want to wait too long, or his blow will create but little sensation and work still less harm!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"That this old rookery has served its time. That it will almost certainly go up in smoke before it is a day older. That coining has gone out of fashion on Rackabout Range for a time. That not one of the gang will dare peach on another, when he knows that death will surely follow such talk. Is that plain enough for you to understand my meaning?"

"But—there's Oren Bohee!" with a shudder.

"He is dead, and the grave covers his body. He never lived long enough to tell how he met his death, and I'm dead sure his corpse will never rise to impart the information. And if those who had a hand in his removal are asses enough to let out their secret, they richly deserve the rope."

Steadily, coldly he spoke. None who heard him then, or who could have watched his massive face, would have detected the slightest sign of remorse or even crime. If he really murdered Oren Bohee, his nerve was truly remarkable.

"If it wasn't for Jes'—if it wasn't for the death of the old man, after such a strange and unaccountable fashion!—I'd feel tempted to take a trip down-country for the good of my health!" muttered Demas Fee, moodily staring at the lamp.

"Not until we can see further ahead of us, my man!" and Colonel Vanderlyn leaned across the table with fiery eyes fixed on the bruised face of his confederate. "You've got to see this thing through before bolting. Bah! that would be the very worst step you could take! They would spot you certain!"

"If I only knew who it was that so cunningly carried out the plans I laid! If I only knew that, I'd ask no odds for the rest of the game. But I can't guess—I'm all at sea. I at first suspected perhaps it was one of those two—Carlsworth or Dymock; but they were both with us when that demon showed himself there on the top of the Jump-off!"

"Mightn't it be Alva Bohee?" hesitated Demas Fee.

"Who arrested himself? Bah!" laughed Vanderlyn.

"I mean, mightn't there be two or three playing the same part. They might have killed Roberts, brought him near here, as the trail showed, then one stayed by him while the other played the part we saw. Then, when once out of sight, couldn't he have sent off Bohee alone, as Masked Mark, and come back to aid the third in carrying out their little game?"

Intensely excited grew Demas Fee as this truly intricate scheme unfolded itself bit by bit to his imagination. And improbable as it really was, Colonel Vanderlyn showed that it struck him as at least possible.

"It may be!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "If I only knew the one who played Masked Mark—if I could only know that—"

Even as the words passed his lips, the door through which they had entered the subterranean apartment was flung wide open, and a figure stood revealed—the figure of Masked Mark, the detective—with bright eyes glaring at them through the cunning mask, and over the barrels of a brace of leveled and cocked revolvers!

"I did! I played that role, Colonel Victor Vanderlyn!"

Sharp and clear came the words, with that peculiar twang which they had noticed when they heard Masked Mark declare his intention of arresting the chief of the crooks of Rackabout Range.

"I played that part, and I've come back to rectify the mistake I made in arresting the wrong person. Hold!" with a deadly sternness, as the two men partially recovered from their half-stupor. "Touch a weapon, and I'll riddle you like—"

With a savage, choking cry, Colonel Vanderlyn swept the lamp to the floor, where it shattered and went out. He leaped to one side, to avoid any shot, then dashed for the other door, of which mention has been made—only to reel back in horror as it swung open and a brilliant light filled the room!

Standing in the door was another Masked Mark! And on his mask they saw blood-red stains. Over his heart was a broad, gory blotch, just as they had seen on the bosom of Dike Roberts!

Demas Fee reeled and staggered back, gasping hoarsely:

"It's Roberts!—alive, or his ghost!"

And in answer there came a low, mocking laugh!

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW THE TRAIL FOR VENGEANCE ENDED.
IF some of those who followed the lead of Barry Carlsworth and Demas Fee from Stokeley's to prove the truth of the strange story told

by the two young ranchers, were visibly reluctant to do so, it was the exact contrary with the dozen or more men who bore Jehudi Fee company on his trail for vengeance.

Although that stern and generally disagreeable personage never so much as suspected the fact, his following was composed almost without exception of the actual Crooks of Rackabout Range.

It will be remembered that at one point in the recital of Barry Carlsworth, he paused as though expecting an open attack from Colonel Victor Vanderlyn. Instead, the giant passed behind the bar and helping himself to liquor, bade Marsh Stokeley supply all who cared for it with the same poison. Then, as the men swallowed their liquor, each one fell back in close proximity to the colonel. Thus, without any suspicious movement, the actual criminals were all gathered in a compact body, ready to obey the first sign or word of their chief.

Not until this was effected did Colonel Vanderlyn deem it prudent to press his query as to whether Dike Roberts had made full confession before death overtook him. If the answer had been in the affirmative—if the colonel had realized how completely the ground was cut away beneath his feet—neither Barry Carlsworth nor Frank Dymock would have lived to complete their story.

It was these men who formed the party riding at the heels of Jehudi Fee to solve the mystery of the double Masked Mark. They felt that their greatest peril lay in that direction, though the majority of them knew well enough that Alva Bohee had no hand in the crimes charged against him. That part of the plan was a mystery to all but big Dick Morton, and thus far he had offered no explanation.

On the contrary, they knew that Dike Roberts did belong to their organization. They knew that he would never have attempted to play the role of the Mounted Detective without orders, and being able to in a measure "read between the lines," they saw how terrible his death had shaken their chief. They knew now that the part actually played by the still living Masked Mark had been intended for Dike Roberts, in disguise. Since that part had been carried out so adroitly as to deceive even the cunning brain that had concocted it, the real Masked Mark must know enough to render his safety their destruction, and each man inwardly swore that the trail should never end until a corpse lay at the further extremity.

Jehudi Fee knew nothing of all this. He only knew that his old and loved friend had died by violence, that his death was charged against the man with the hidden face. He made no effort to solve the mystery clinging about the double mask; he wanted vengeance first of all.

Yet he was not a man to set at work blindly, and scarcely had they drawn out of sight of Stokeley's when he abruptly hailed Tip, the Weasel, who was rapidly trotting over the level ground, lifting the trail by the light of the lantern he bore.

"They's no break, boss—it's clean as whistle, an' jes' play fer to pick it out!" squeaked the withered, old-young imp, his ferret eyes glittering redly as he turned in answer to that stern call.

"There is only one set of hoof-prints," said Jehudi Fee, bending over in his saddle, his gaze still keen and shrewd. "There should be two if that demon took Alva Bohee with him."

"Mebbe they will be, funder along," grinned the impish guide, "but not now. I see'd the critter when he sot off. They was on'y the one hoss. He chucked the Parson into the saddle, like he was a bag o' feathers, then jumped up abind an' putt off, lickety-brin'le! I see'd so much, afore the do' was shet onto 'em by the kunnel."

"You are positive?" hesitated Jehudi. "Remember, if we make a mistake now, it may ruin all our hopes."

"What I know I know, an' I know jes' what I tell ye I know," muttered the imp, showing his teeth in a half-savage fashion, evidently displeased at having his ability as a spy and guide called into question. "Ef ye don't want to folle this trail, you kin git some other gent fer to show you the way, fer I won't! When I know, I know, I reckon—I do!"

"They's no discount onto the critter, squire," hurriedly muttered Dick Morton, pressing closer to Fee. "He's good as a bloodhound on sech a scent, an' when he talks that-a-way, you kin lay your last dollar he's got holt o' the right end."

Though it was clear that Jehudi Fee still had some lingering doubts, he yielded to this double assurance, and once more the human weasel took up the trail, lifting it at a rate that caused the best of the animals to trot their best, and a few to even break into a gallop to keep from being distanced.

"Better have him double-up with the lightest man, or he will soon break down at the rate he is going," muttered Fee, to Dick Morton, who kept close to his side.

A low, half-sneering laugh broke from the bearded lips of the big ranchero, then he made reply:

"Which shows you hain't see'd much o' Tip,

squire! They ain't a hoss in the kentry as kin break him down, fer big money! 'Course they's plenty as kin double onto him fer sart'in distances, but take it day in an' day out, that little dried up runt'd lay out a hull rijiment o' critters, one down the other come up, an' actilly grow fat over it, too! You cain't break him down, noways, squire!"

As though he caught some of this interchange, Tip Stokeley let out a fresh link, gliding over the plain at an astonishing pace, though showing no symptoms of extra exertion, his head bending low to read the sign by the light of his lantern.

The ranchers were obliged to press their animals to keep within easy distance of him, and as mile after mile was passed over at the same rate, the doubts of Jehudi Fee became a thing of the past, so far as their guide was concerned.

There was no serious break in the trail, though at times it passed over spots where it seemed incredible that even the ferret-eyed Tip could pick up the tracks so swiftly, but if not, his reasoning or his luck proved marvelous, for without an exception he hit the trail after passing the difficult stretches.

The trail gradually bent to the right, forming a segment of a mammoth circle, covering perhaps half a dozen miles, without any sign of Masked Mark's having paused even for a moment or attempted to break his trail. It was now trending toward the upper end of Rackabout Range, and this was the only suspicious fact as yet discovered.

"Ef the critter was jes' what he claimed, an' meant ole business in 'restin' the Parson," muttered Dick Morton, "he'd 'a' kep' straight on to the South with the feller. 'Stead o' that, it looks like he was workin' 'round to the ole stampin'-grounds!"

"No matter where he goes, he cannot hide himself from my vengeance!" sternly cried the leader of the party. "He murdered my old friend. With my hand on his cold brow, I swore to never know rest until that murder was fully avenged. Heaven has recorded that oath, and I'll keep it or die!"

"They's one thing dead shore! That critter couldn't 'a' bin ole Roberts, as it looked at the fu'st jump-off. They's a heap o' trickery mixed up in the a'f'air, some way or other, but I cain't see through the muddle—kin you?"

Dick Morton gazed keenly but furtively into the stern, thin face of the man beside whom he was riding as he put this question. And, although he never for a moment suspected the fact, on the answer Jehudi Fee might give to that query, his life actually hinged. If he suspected the truth, he would never know rest until he had reached the bottom of the black, sinful plot, and even though the life of his only son might be thereby endangered, if not absolutely sacrificed, his rigid, unbending sense of honor would never permit him to keep silence. He would disclose the truth, let the consequence be what it might. And knowing this, Dick Morton fairly held his breath as he awaited the reply.

"I only know this: my old friend is dead, and two honest men have declared that he came by his death at the hands of the fellow who calls himself Masked Mark. I mean to hunt him until we meet."

"An' then? Ef we should jump him out here to-night?"

"If he declined to halt, or if he could not prove the killing was in self defense, then—"

A shrill yell from Tip Stokeley broke in upon his grim utterance, and swinging the lantern high over his head, the impish guide screeched:

"Thar he is! Stole away—whoop-ee!"

Indistinctly visible in the moonlight the avengers of Dike Roberts caught sight of a horse and rider breaking from a little patch of timber and dashing at full speed over the prairie!

A dozen hoarse throats took up the shrill cry, and high over them all rose the strained voice of Jehudi Fee, rendered unrecognizable even to his own ears by the strong passions that fought in his bosom.

"Halt, you scoundrel!" he screamed, plunging spurs rowel deep into the flanks of his animal, plunging forward at top speed. "Halt and surrender or you die!"

"Down him, boys!" Dick Morton hissed to his fellow criminals. "Don't give him a chance! Down him, afore he kin fit a noose fer our thrapples!"

That was enough, and scarcely allowing Jehudi Fee to utter his wild challenge and warning—without giving the pursued time to either reply or obey—the ranchers opened fire with rifles that spoke at every leap of their animals, the irregular roar drowning the rapid clicking of the levers as they ejected empty shells and sent fresh cartridges into the firing chamber.

Only an instant, it seemed, then the leaders saw the horse of the fugitive throw up his head and plunge headlong, while a high, shrill scream came from its rider!

And it was the scream of—not Masked Mark, but a woman!

A cry of horror broke from the lips of Jehudi Fee, for a horrible fear assailed him as that ter-

ror-stricken voice came to his ears. He recognized it, though so distorted by pain and fright—recognized it as that of his daughter, Adola!

The ranchers, too, knew that that scream never came from masculine lips, and with ejaculations of surprise and horror, they jerked up their horses, leaving Jehudi Fee to dash on alone. Tip Stokeley, laughing like a veritable fiend as he was, rolled over and over on the sward behind them, crying:

"Shot at the gander an' hit the goose, or I'm a liar!"

Savagely Dick Morton turned upon him, lifting his horse as though he would cause it to trample the mocking imp beneath its iron-shod hoofs; but Tip rolled swiftly out of danger, and dropping his lantern, took to his heels like a very will-o'-the-wisp.

Jehudi Fee had eyes, ears, thoughts only for the figure that struck the plain beyond the fallen horse with a sickening force, rolling over and over, and then lying still and motionless, as though dead.

He sped up to its side, leaping from the saddle without drawing rein or checking his horse in the slightest. It was a wonder mishap did not befall him, but he escaped injury, and the next moment he was on his knees, lifting the head and shoulders of the figure in his arms. It was clad in masculine garments, and its face was covered with a sable mask, but his father's love was enough to read the truth. And he was right. Adola Fee lay in his arms, seemingly dead, the red blood staining his hands as it flowed freely from a wound in the breast.

He tore the mask from her face, and pressed his lips to her forehead. He uttered her name, coupled with prayers to her—with curses on his own folly. For a brief space he was little better than a maniac, for if he was so stern, so sour, so rigid and unbending, he loved his children with a love that burned all the more intensely from its being smothered by his iron will and kept in stern subjection.

But then, as he felt a slight tremor creep over her form, his senses suddenly came back to him, and he called aloud:

"Doctor—Doctor Long!"

From out the confused huddle of men, one of their number broke, and dismounted beside him. Dick Morton sprung to the ground, caught up the still burning lantern, and hurried with it to the scene of the sad mishap.

Already Jehudi Fee had resigned his daughter to the more experienced hands of the doctor, and as he took the lantern from the hand of Morton, he spoke, his voice as cold and even as though the life of the being whom he loved best of all on earth was not hovering between death and life:

"I don't blame you, men, but you had better leave me with my dead. Go—follow the trail of Masked Mark, if you will; but go!"

"She ain't dead, I hope, squire?" huskily uttered Morton, his hard, coarse nature softened, for few in Rackabout Range but loved Adola, more for the terrible sufferings she had so recently undergone.

"Not yet. Whether she will live or die, rests in the hands of the Lord. Will you take the men and go?"

"Ef we cain't do no good, nur help ye any," hesitated Dick.

"Go now! One of your bullets struck her. Go now, if you are wise men!" harshly muttered the old man, his eyes ablaze, his bony fingers about the butt of a revolver.

The men saw that he was almost beside himself with mingled grief, remorse and rage. They knew that his warning was given in deadly earnest, and to tell the plain truth, they were by no means eager to remain and gaze upon the work their rash hands had wrought.

Dick Morton swung his heavy frame into the saddle and without another word rode away over the prairie, in the direction of Stokeley's. His comrades followed his lead without a question, but when those kneeling figures, with the lantern dimly lighting the scene, died away in the distance, Dick Morton drew rein and faced his mates.

"This is the durnedest night's work I ever come acrost, in the hull o' my 'sperience, lads," he muttered, tugging nervously at his shaggy beard. "They's a heap more into the air then we're ready fer, I'm thinkin'! Fu'st this cussed Masked Mark knocks the plans all west-end-an'-crooked! Then comes the Fee gal, rigged out in men's clothes, an' with her face kivered over with a black rag, ridin' over the plain this o' night! Then Dike Roberts rubbed out, the devil only knows how an' who by! I tell you, boys, the clouds is gittin' mighty dark an' thar's a he-ole storm brewin'—you hear me?"

"We cain't folle the trail 'thout no light, an' Tip gone nobody kin say whar to!" muttered another of the ranchers.

"That's a lie, Adkins!" came a shrill voice, as the impish guide appeared at a little distance, ready for flight or advance as the circumstances would appear to justify. "Here Tip is, ready fer trailin' or what you like—on'y not fer hoss-beddin', like big Dick Morton wanted to make out o' me!"

"Ef I think you knowed it was the gal, I'd—"

"I didn't know, not cntel she squealed,"

soberly. "Then I *hed* to bu'st out—it was so funny to see a dad shootin' his own gal!"

"Jump ahind the boys, or else light out fer home, Tip!" shortly uttered Morton. "We'll go hunt up the kunnel, lads. He kin say what we'd best do next, fer durned ef I know!"

"It's a trick, shore!" said Adkins, as the party took up their route toward Stokeley's. "The kunnel showed that plain enough in his face, when the ole man onkivered Roberts. A high ole trick somewhar, but that p'izen critter jumped the wrong man fer the boss, anyway! That's one comfort."

"Ef he didn't do it to git him out o' danger," was the gloomy retort.

"Then you think that—"

"I *can't* think—an' that's the matter!" snarled Morton. "I want to find the kunnel an' see what he thinks, fu'st!"

"Ef he ain't wuss muxed up then any one o' us, then I miss my guess by a heap an' a pritty good plenty! I never yit see a man that looked more ha'nted then he did when the ole man showed up Dike Roberts!" pursued Adkins, who seemed in a much more talkative mood than his superior—for it was plain enough that Dick Morton occupied that position in the gang.

"Can anybody tell what it all means, anyway?" asked another, prominent in the ranks of the Crooks of Rackabout Range. "All I know is that the colonel summoned us to meet at Stokeley's, on important business."

"I reckon that's all anybody in this gang kin say," Dick Morton growled. "Ef more trouble comes of it then they hes a'ready, the kunnel's the one who'd orter shoulder the heft o' the load—an' he's got to tote his full sheer, too, or they's goin' to be a he-ole row kicked up—an' you'll see my boots twinklin' in the fu'st ranks, now you hear me whisper!"

"Ef he ain't losin' his grip, it gits me why he tuck so much lip from them two sassy cusses! They spit into his face, made a pritty clean record, too, they say, even afore he struck the Range."

"He hed his reasons, I'll say that," admitted Dick Morton, in a more even tone. "He'll make his teeth meet in the flesh when the sign's right, don't you borry no trouble, lad. An' ef I was you, an' looked for'ard to w'arin' gray ha'r, I wouldn't talk quite so keerless when the kunnel is nigh enough fer to ketch onto your sayin'. He'll down ye, shore!"

"If any of us are to wear gray hair, more than those we can already show, it's action we want most, not talk," gruffly interposed Thrailkill.

There was that in his tones that caused even the talkative Adkins to keep silence for some time as they rode rapidly over the plain toward the tavern or storehouse.

They did not lack food for thought. Though not one of the party could fully understand the strange occurrences of that eventful night, there was not one among them all but felt that danger great and deadly threatened them from some quarter. Masked Mark was at last getting in his work, as it appeared, and they feared the result.

The party did not spare their horses, but it was some little time before they could cover the distance that lay between the scene of the tragedy and Stokeley's, and as they at length came in sight of the building, their animals were quite ready to obey the tightening reins and come down to a walk.

"I kin jest make out a light, but I don't see no hosses hitched," muttered Morton, uneasily. "Mebbe the kunnel hain't got back yit. Hold up a bit, an' I'll go take a squint. Ef he hain't got back, we'll have to strike out fer ther Jump-off."

He leaped to the ground and strode away without waiting for an answer. He little knew the consequence of that natural action of his.

He gained the door, and peering inside, without touching the partially-open barrier, he caught a glimpse of Clem Stokeley still sitting in his great chair, smoking placidly. He fancied he also heard Polly moving about, and without further hesitation he stepped inside the bar-room.

Instantly the door swung to behind him, and before he could realize his peril or utter a sound, a heavy blanket was flung over his head, a pair of muscular arms tightened about his neck, while other hands pinioned his hands, fastening them together with a sharp click and the sensation of cold steel. He was handcuffed, his feet knocked from under him, and almost before he could realize that he had blundered into a trap his weapons were stripped from about his waist, and a stern voice muttered in his muffled ears:

"One sound from your lips before we give you leave, Dick Morton, and out goes your light forever! We mean business!"

All the steel was taken out of him by the sudden attack and complete surprise. He trembled like a leaf, and thought only of preserving his worthless life.

The blanket was removed from his head, but before he regained the use of his eyes sufficiently to recognize either of his assailants, a handkerchief was passed over them and securely knotted behind his head. Then a stern voice spoke:

"The game's all up with you, Dick Morton, and unless you want to die on the instant, you'll act just as you are bidden. Adkins and Thrailkill are out yonder? Nod, if I am right."

He nodded promptly.

"Good enough! We want them more than all the rest. You will call out and bid them come here for a moment. Steady your voice, for if it betrays you or gives you away, down you go too dead to skin! You understand?"

He did understand; and with a desperate effort he cried:

"I say, Adkins an' Thrailkill, let the boys hold your critters an' wait while you come here fer a bit. Business, now!"

It was an admirable performance, under the circumstances; and, without a thought of danger, the two men addressed dismounted and advanced, stepping inside, only to be assailed by strong hands, just as Dick Morton had been attacked. But despite the surprise, Thrailkill managed to cry out in loud tones:

"Help, boys! The bloodhounds have got us foul!"

CHAPTER XIX.

"THREE OF A KIND!"

THOUGH taken quite as much by surprise as either Colonel Vanderlyn or any of the men composing the party of investigation by the abrupt appearance of Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective, on the brink of the Jump-off, both Barry Carlsworth and Frank Dymock were cool and collected enough when they led the major portion of the party in a direction opposite to that taken by Vanderlyn and Demas Fee. It seemed a perfectly natural action if the main object was to capture the man with the hidden face, since now if he tried to double in either direction, he could hardly avoid encountering one party or the other. But before they reached the point, a mile away from the scene of the tragedy, where the rock wall sloped down to meet the level, Barry Carlsworth called a halt in earnest tones.

"Men of Rackabout Range? Why should we waste our time and energies chasing an innocent man—a legalized instrument of the law—while there are plenty of actual criminals within our reach?"

The men looked dumfounded at this totally unexpected address, and before they could recover, Dymock chimed in:

"It's gospel truth he's slinging at ye, friends! If you are the honest men we take you to be, we can clear the Range of those crooked rascals who have done so much to injure the good name of this entire section, before the sun rises again! The only question is, will you do it? Will you lend us a helping hand, and so make success certain at a single blow, or must we go on as we have begun, and alarm the gang by arresting one or two of their number alone?"

"Sling us an easy one, for a starter, Frank," uttered one of the party, with a short, uneasy laugh that showed how completely he was puzzled by the sudden turn affairs had taken.

Both Dymock and Carlsworth faced the party, scanning each face in rapid succession. They believed that all there were perfectly square men, wholly ignorant of the cunning schemes of Colonel Vanderlyn and his band of Crooks; believed them men who could be trusted to aid in carrying out the bold plan they had formed; but if a single traitor was present, failure and death might follow instead.

"I'll risk it, pard!" muttered Dymock. "We've got to do the work to-night, or there'll be a scattering of the covey in good earnest, and then we'll have double trouble."

"All right, Kingsland," said Carlsworth, answering the quaintly-put query of the ranchero. "We don't ask any of you to go into the game with your eyes shut. You shall know the whole thing, as well as few words can explain it."

"Colonel Victor Vanderlyn is the head of the gang of Crooks who have been flooding this section with counterfeit money, and running off stock between spells. He has his coining works in or somewhere near the tavern, and the Stokeleys are only his agents in running the shebang. He gave the old cripple money to buy and stock the place."

There was an outburst of surprise and even incredulity at this rapid announcement. It did not seem possible that they could have been so thoroughly deceived in a neighbor and daily associate.

"What I tell you, friends, shall be proven to the very letter, if you will consent to be guided by us two, for a few hours," hastily added Carlsworth. "There is no time to lose if we hope to tear the masks from the faces of the real criminals. If we give them too much rope, they'll destroy the main proofs of their evil work, and then laugh both us and the law to scorn."

"A laugh like that wouldn't cut near so deep as the one we'd hear all the rest of our lives if it should turn out you were the guilty ones, and the colonel and his pards the innocent," half-laughed Kingsland.

"We don't ask you to compromise yourself in this case, until you are fully satisfied that we have right and the law altogether on our side," was the cool, confident reply. "All we ask now is for you to go back with us to Stokeley's, where

your doubts shall be removed, if there's power enough in truth and justice to lift the scales. Will you do this much?"

"I will, for one," frankly replied Kingsland. "All I want is to be sure we are striking at the guilty ones instead of the innocent. Prove that Colonel Vanderlyn is leader of the Crooks, and I'll go as far to arrest him as you dare!"

A murmur of approval came from the remainder of the party, and with greatly lightened hearts the two young ranchers renewed their assurances. All they asked at present was the moral support of the honest men of Rackabout Range.

The victory was much more easily won than it would have been but for the curious actions and manner of Colonel Vanderlyn that night. Ever since the moment when the corpse of Dike Roberts so strangely kept the appointment made by him while in the flesh, the big ex-soldier had been cutting his own throat, metaphorically speaking. And now it was not so difficult for the honest men to regard him as the chief of the gang of evil-doers, bearing all this in mind.

Riding at the head of their newly enlisted force, Barry Carlsworth and Frank Dymock led the way back to Stokeley's, making a wide circuit about the scene of the tragedy, for they were not yet ready to encounter Colonel Vanderlyn.

"It's almost certain he'll keep on after Masked Mark," muttered Carlsworth to his mate as they rode rapidly over the prairie. "He must be convinced that unless he can silence him, once for all, his cake's dough! But it is just possible that he will double on us, and try to cover his tracks at Stokeley's. We must keep our eyes all open, Frank! It's business, now."

"War to the knife, and the knife to the hilt!" Dymock grated through his clenched teeth, his dark eyes glowing like unto balls of living fire. "To-morrow, please Heaven! I can stand by the grave of our murdered friend, without blushing or hanging my head in shame at the thought that he still remains unavenged."

Barry made no reply to this passionate speech, and the party increased their speed, maintaining their rapid gait until drawing near to Stokeley's. Then the two leaders drew rein, and when the men gathered about them, Carlsworth spoke:

"There's nothing lost by going to work right end foremost. We'll light and leave our animals here, for the time being. You men can wait with them, while Frank and I go ahead to see how the ground lies. If you should hear any unusual row, such as burning powder, close in and arrest everybody you can lay hooks on, including us. Then, if you are satisfied that we are abusing your confidence, you know how to reward us."

It is just such blunt talk as this that "hits a man right where he lives," to use the vernacular, and when the two trailers stole silently away from the men toward the dimly visible building, there was not a man left behind who failed to trust them implicitly. From that moment they would have stout and hearty backing.

"It looks as though none of the company had got back yet," muttered Dymock, as they vainly looked for horses in the vicinity of the tavern.

"So much the better for us, then," was the guarded reply. "If we can catch the old man and woman unawares, and get them good frightened, we'll be sure of the men back yonder. With them on our side to start with, we can easily win over the rest of the square boys, and sweep the board clean."

He ceased speaking, uttering a low hiss and sinking silently to the ground in company with his mate, as a tall, gaunt figure came out of the stables and carrying something in her arms, for they could see now that it was the gentle Polly—pass hurriedly away from the buildings toward a dense patch of stunted timber and undergrowth a few rods away. And as they moved cautiously forward, they caught the sound of a low, gratified nicker coming from the covert.

The two scouts interchanged quick glances as they lay motionless on the grass, for they knew that something out of the ordinary line of events was on the docket.

In a few moments Polly reappeared, and entered the house. And scarcely had she vanished from their sight, than the two young ranchers stole cautiously forward to investigate the sounds they had overheard in the covert.

This was not difficult to accomplish, and as they carefully scrutinized the two horses tethered in the cover, comfortably munching away at their nose-bags full of oats, they felt the hot blood tingling through every vein.

"Good enough!" muttered Dymock, his eyes fairly ablaze. "They're the animals Vanderlyn and young Fee rode. They must be inside the house—perhaps in the secret apartment!"

"Wherever they are, we've got to take 'em!" as sternly uttered Carlsworth, though his brows momentarily clouded as he thought of Adola Fee—his sister!

Silently they stole back to the house, and through the partly open door they saw Clem Stokeley in his chair, saw the skeleton virago bus-

ting to and fro after her customary fashion, rarely silent or motionless save when sound asleep in her bed. Besides these twain, the room and house appeared to be wholly deserted.

Touching Barry on the arm, Frank Dymock moved toward the stables, where they secured a couple of stout and heavy horse-blankets.

"Those two precious rascals must be somewhere about the ranch, and a single screech from Skinny Polly would put them on their guard. That we can't afford. I've twisted a rope for the big devil's throat, and a sudden death by knife or bullet won't satisfy me!"

"You tackle her, and I'll answer for the old man. But don't forget that it's the use of their tongues we want, first and foremost. Without them, we could hardly scent out the head rascal. For a month we've tried to smell out the secret, but all to no purpose!"

Dymock nodded silently, and they glided back to the door of the bar-room. Scarcely had they gained it, when Polly came to the entrance and looked out as though watching for the ranchers to come back. And before she could realize her peril, Dymock flung the heavy blanket over her head, twisting it about her shoulders, and tripping her up with more dexterity than care for her precious bones, he effectually stifled all outcry, though she fought desperately as a wild-cat.

Barry Carlsworth leaped into the room and clapped a cocked revolver at the head of the astounded host, muttering:

"One word above your breath, and out goes your light!"

There was no trace of lightness or jesting in his voice or manner, and Clem Stokeley made the best of a bad matter by yielding at discretion.

It did not take Frank Dymock long to overpower Polly, and when she was firmly bound and gagged, he hastened to treat the cripple to a dose of the same medicine. Then he said:

"Better go and call in the boys, pard. They shall hear all we get out of these lame ducks, as the shortest way of getting at the heart of the secret. Make haste!"

Little need of that warning. Barry Carlsworth knew that they were playing their last and heaviest stake in the game. If they should lose it, they were ruined for all time. And if the other ranchers should come up before the trick was fairly turned, the chances would once more be against them.

In less than two minutes the ranchers filed silently into the bar-room, and the door was closed behind them, one man being selected to keep watch and give notice of any one drawing near the place.

Skinny Polly was placed in a chair beside her husband, and standing in front of them, Barry Carlsworth spoke sternly:

"The game is played out, as far as you two are concerned. There are men prepared to swear enough against you to provide you with a home for the rest of your years, where your board and lodging won't cost you a red cent. And there's only one thing that can save you from it, too!"

There was no reply, because both of the captives were securely gagged; but those who watched them so keenly, saw that they were rapidly weakening, and would be only too glad to accept any reasonable offer.

"We can get along without you, so far as proving the counterfeiting and the stealing goes, but as we believe you were led into the muzz by still worse heads, you shall have a chance to turn State's evidence, if you will agree to—"

He paused, almost laughing aloud at the ludicrous haste with which they both nodded their heads, choking and swelling up in their vain endeavor to speak. Still, he did not care to trust them too far, at first, where so much was at stake, and he added in cold, stern tones:

"You shall have that chance for your lives, if you serve the cause of justice to the best of your ability. Now I am going to ask you some questions, and I want you to answer them truthfully, as you hope for clemency. You can nod or shake your heads, as the case may require."

"You know who is at the head of this gang of crooks?"

They nodded vigorously.

"Is it Alva Bohee?"

A still more emphatic shaking of both heads in the negative cleared away what few doubts still lingered in the minds of the ranchers.

"Can you take oath the chief rascal is Victor Vanderlyn?"

Nods in the affirmative, so vigorous in the case of Polly that only the quick aid of Barry Carlsworth kept her from pitching forward on her face from the chair.

"Is Colonel Vanderlyn now about the premises? Is he not at this moment in the secret place where the coining is carried on? Is not Demas Fee in his company? Are you willing to show us how we can effect an entrance without first alarming them?" rapidly asked Barry, to each of which questions there came affirmative nods until it seemed as though the rapidly oscillating necks must give way beneath the strain.

"Continue as well as you have begun, and we will promise to get you out of this scrape as lightly as possible. Now I am going to set your

lips at liberty, Polly, but if you attempt to give the alarm by word, sound or action, woe be unto you! You understand my meaning?"

She nodded once again, and stooping, Barry cut the thongs that held her ankles together; but he hesitated when he came to remove the gag. On second thoughts he resolved not to risk it while inside the house. It was barely possible that the woman might try to foil them, after all, and there was too much at stake for taking any unnecessary chances.

Leaving a guard over the old cripple, he led Polly outdoors and to the stables. He set her tongue free, and she rapidly explained the workings of the secret chamber, describing the manner of entering and leaving it, from either the indoor or the outside entrance.

After this full confession, the way was plain, and little time cut to waste. The gag was replaced, and Polly taken back to the side of her husband. She was bound to the chair, and then the party hastily completed their preparations for the capture of the chief criminals.

Frank Dymock passed into the room where the corpse of Dike Roberts had been placed, and rapidly stripped off his outer clothing. Then, dressed in the bloodstained shirt and the crimson marked mask, he led half of the men outdoors and to the secret entrance described by Polly Stokeley.

While he was thus engaged, Barry Carlsworth opened the cunningly arranged trap in the kitchen, and dropped silently into the pit. For some little time he remained thus, before giving the sign for his allies to follow him. When they did, all was dark, though they carried lights with them, covered so as to wholly absorb the bright rays.

Frank Dymock found the arrangements of the hidden passage just as Polly described them, and found no difficulty in gaining the further end, or in unlocking the secret door which led into the counterfeiting den. This done, with his ear bent and eagerly listening for the agreed-upon signal from Barry Carlsworth, he waited as patiently as might be.

Not for long. He heard the voice of his mate, and then the wild ejaculations of the surprised rascals, accompanied by the crash of the shattered lamp. He flung open the door, and unmasked his lamp, showing like a grim and ghastly phantom to the bewildered criminals.

Not for more than an instant. Then, desperate, knowing that all was discovered, that only speedy flight could save him from imprisonment if nothing worse, Colonel Vanderlyn drew a revolver and leaped forward, trying to break away—

Only to stagger back as the bloody phantom hurled his light full into his face, then leaped forward and clutched him with a force and determination such as only healthy flesh could display. Fiercely they struggled for a moment, then both went down together with a sullen thump—a thump that blended with the muffled report of a revolver!

A hoarse, gasping cry and curse commingled—and Frank Dymock leaped to his feet, leaving the big ex-soldier lying on the floor, writhing like a scorched reptile!

His own weapon had exploded by the shock of the fall, and sent a bullet through his side, almost direct for his heart.

Prompt as Frank Dymock, Carlsworth, as Masked Mark, leaped upon Demas Fee, prepared for a desperate struggle, for he was determined to use no weapons against the brother of the maiden whom he loved; but he was most delightfully surprised. The young man, realizing that all was lost, made only a feeble, mechanical resistance, and before any of the excited ranchers could come to the assistance of the two pards, the victory was won and both criminals helpless; one handcuffed, the other gasping painfully on the earthen floor where his lifeblood was rapidly forming a pool at his side.

Barry Carlsworth kept Demas Fee in his own care, and with a sign to Frank Dymock he returned to the upper chamber, turning his captive over to a couple of stout men. He quickly produced ropes, by the aid of which the giant outlaw was lifted up through the trap and borne into the room where Dike Roberts had been unmasked but a few hours before. He was placed upon a few blankets, and despite his savage snarls of hatred, the two pards, still in their disguise of Masked Mark, knelt beside him, seeking to stanch the flow of blood.

They were thus engaged when the outer door was flung open by a strong hand, and a figure stepped over the threshold to be greeted with sharp ejaculations of wonder and surprise.

"Three of a kind, or I'm a liar right from head-waters!" cried Kingsland, as he leaped to his feet in wild amazement.

There stood a third Masked Mark!

CHAPTER XX.

MASKED MARK RETIRES TO PRIVATE LIFE.

HE paid no attention to the startled cries and looks of the ranchers, but stepping hastily inside, closing the door behind him, he warmly grasped the hands which both Barry Carlsworth and Frank Dymock extended toward him, quickly uttering:

"You have done nobly so far, but there's still

more to do before we can be sure we've won the game. There's a party coming in this direction, who have been hunting for me—"

"If those who took your track at the Jump-off, there's little to fear from them, though there may possibly be one or two 'goats' among them," interposed Carlsworth.

"It won't answer to run any unnecessary risks," was the swift, stern reply. "Straighten up the looks of things here, and when they come in, as of course they will, we can make sure none of them can work mischief while all is being explained to them. Lively! They will be here in a minute or two!"

Naturally enough, seeing how perfectly the trio seemed to understand each other, the first idea of the ranchers was that this third Masked Mark must surely be Alva Bohee, but in vain did they try to recognize his voice. He was either some other person, or taking great pains to disguise his voice. Or, might it not be that there was some peculiar arrangement about the cunning mask that produced that nasal twang?

They were willing enough to work, however, let the mystery of the triple masks turn out how it might, after the glimpse of the truth which had been given them, and Colonel Vanderlyn, seemingly rapidly sinking from the effects of his wound, was carried into the adjoining room, whither the body of Dike Roberts had been placed. The blood-stains were hastily covered up and Clem Stokeley was unbound and set at liberty with the understanding that his life depended on his keeping silence in regard to what had or was about to occur.

Polly, less to be trusted, was concealed in the other room and placed under guard, as well as left with her jaws gagged.

The three men in masks took up their station in the same room, leaving Kingsland to take charge of affairs in the other until the proper time came for them to appear.

The news brought by Masked Mark number three proved to be correct, and five minutes later the two parties were united in the bar-room, the latest arrivals suspecting nothing of what had happened within those walls since they rode away. And from the calm, stolid manner in which Clem Stokeley smoked away in his great chair, even the most suspicious might well have doubted the truth if told.

It was not a difficult task, after all, for of the entire party, Marsh Stokeley alone belonged to the gang of crooks. And he was too sluggish and slow-witted to make an offensive movement before a couple of revolvers were clapped to his head and stout thongs applied to his arms.

When the men of Rackabout Range understood just how the case stood, they were eager to prove their honesty and fidelity, even under lead of the very man whom they had so recently been hunting to kill.

They at once sent off all their horses, and posted guards around the building to warn them in ample time of the approach of the other party.

The three men in masks, accompanied by several of the more prominent men of the Range, paid Colonel Vanderlyn a visit. They hoped to gain a confession from him before death claimed him.

At first the prospects were far from bright. The wounded man, deceived by the fictitious strength produced by the strong stimulants they poured down his throat, allowed naught save bitter curses and revilings to pass his lips. He denied that he was guilty. He defied them to prove any crime against him. Even when he was confronted by the evidences of coining which were found in plenty in the secret chamber, he defied them to connect him in any way with it, more than that he knew such a chamber existed. And he declared that whatever the Stokeleys might say against him, was simply hatched up in hopes of clearing themselves of the worst charges.

But then, as his own fierce outbursts weakened him, and he was sternly refused any fresh stimulant, his rapidly growing weakness convinced him that he was indeed in a bad way. With his strength, faded away his defiant ferocity, and breaking down, he made full and free confession of his many crimes.

He admitted being head and front of the gang of thieves and counterfeiters which had infested Rackabout Range. He admitted that he was the actual owner of the house and all its contents; that the Stokeleys only acted as his servants.

This was as far as he would go at first, stoutly denying that he knew anything more about the murder of Oren Bohee than all the Range knew; and he was just being confronted with Demas Fee, when word came that a strong party of horsemen was approaching the house, from the South.

Feeling sure that this party could be none other than that which had set out on the trail of Masked Mark and his prisoner, Alva Bohee, under leadership of Jehudi Fee, a trap was hastily prepared for at least the chief criminals among them.

It has already been shown how the three most prominent in the party were captured, by Barry Carlsworth and Frank Dymock, though a couple of stout men were in the other room in

readiness to come to their assistance in case of need. And when Thrailkill gave his cry of warning, they did appear, and the two rascals were bound without being seriously injured.

Without the tavern a scarcely less exciting scene was taking place. Under lead of the third Masked Mark, the rest of the honest men of Rackabout Range slipped out at the rear of the tavern and mounted their horses, moving around so as to come upon the party beyond without exciting their suspicion that they came from the house, if possible. But when the wild shout of warning came from the house, Masked Mark cried:

"Charge them down, lads! Hurt no one who will surrender, but take all you possibly can!"

There was no time for a more elaborate address, for already the party of crooks had taken the alarm, and were on the point of scattering in wild confusion each one to care for his own safety, when—

"Halt! hands up and empty, or down goes your house!" Masked Mark shouted, his tones sharp and menacing as he led the headlong charge from cover. "No one shall be hurt who surrenders, but death for those who try to escape by flight!"

The majority of the crooks, taken by surprise and without a chief to direct them, gave up in despair. A few fled as fast as their horses could carry them, and more than one made his escape while those who surrendered were being secured. Still, it was an almost complete victory, and great were the rejoicings of the honest portion of the men of Rackabout Range when they regained Stokeley's.

Silently Frank Dymock and Barry Carlsworth met Masked Mark on his return, gripping his gloved hand with ardent force that told him the truth even before a syllable crossed their lips.

"He has confessed, then?" he said, slowly.

"He murdered poor Oren?"

"Yes. Some time we will tell you all he admitted. Just now he is dying. If you wish to see him—"

Masked Mark pushed past them and entered the room of death. Colonel Vanderlyn feebly opened his eyes as the man with the hidden face paused before him. And then Masked Mark removed the covering which hid his real features.

Alva Bohee stood revealed.

A wondering, bewildered look came into the face of the dying man, and he strove to speak. Instead of words, dark blood gushed from his lips, and his head fell back.

The chief of the Crooks of Rackabout Range was dead!

Then, in the first moments of the growing dawn, the story of the mysterious masks was made clear to the men of Rackabout Range, though several points which it may be proper for us to touch upon in concluding this record, were passed over by those who told the strange story. For that reason, and to avoid repetition as much as possible, the exact words of the three masqueraders will not be set down here.

As has already been hinted at in these pages, Oren Bohee suspected the real facts concerning the coining of false coin in Rackabout Range, and sent information to that effect to the Governor of the Territory, also telling him that a brother of the writer, Alva Bohee, was connected in a responsible manner with a prominent detective agency in Chicago, and that he could perhaps be induced to take charge of the investigations which should certainly follow.

His advice was acted upon, but before more than the first preliminaries could be arranged, he met his death by a cowardly act of assassination. Partly from revenge for his success in love, partly because of the information which he had sent to the governor.

Colonel Vanderlyn committed the murder, in company of Fee the younger, who alone knew that the chief of the Crooks had returned to the Range that night. When suspicion was cast on him, Colonel Vanderlyn had no difficulty in proving an *alibi* by prominent men at a distance—they were interested in the nefarious work of coining, and did not hesitate to swear to a lie.

It was with a double purpose that Alva Bohee came to Rackabout Range, after several consultations with the two men whom Oren Bohee had loved as though his own blood flowed through their veins. They convinced Alva that it would be a difficult and risky job, and in order to avert suspicion from themselves, the scheme of the masks was perfected. Half a dozen of these were manufactured with the greatest care, regardless of expense, and not until they were completed and found satisfactory in every respect, did Masked Mark make his appearance on Rackabout Range.

The young men took turns in donning the disguise, and by having the Mounted Detective seen by others while in their company, it quickly became apparent—on the surface—that the mysterious man with the hidden face could not possibly be any known inhabitant of the Range.

All worked to perfection until Dike Roberts

found one of the secret *caches* where a mask was hidden, though the last one to wear it luckily escaped detection. He lost no time in carrying the news to his employer, who would not rest satisfied until he was personally convinced that with it even one so well known as Roberts could deceive him. And to prove this, they met in the timber near Jehudi Fee's house, as being about half-way between their respective houses.

Thus it happened that Adola Fee became convinced that her lover had been murdered by Masked Mark.

And thus it came about that Colonel Vanderlyn resolved to kill two birds with one stone; to remove a dangerous enemy and avert suspicion from himself, in addition to conferring a great favor on his right-hand man, Demas Fee.

He had Dike Roberts firmly beneath his thumb, through a perfect knowledge of his past life before Jessie was born, and cunningly awakened his hatred and suspicion against Alva Bohee by affirming that his frequent calls were more to discover proofs of his guilt and to ruin his child than aught else.

Thus it came that Dike Roberts attempted to play Masked Mark, at the meeting called by the colonel, for that especial purpose. And there is no knowing how things would have turned out, had not Roberts, in his disguise, caught sight of the real Masked Mark coming toward him. He lay in ambush until he believed he could forever rid the band of the dangerous man with the hidden face, then charged—to meet death himself.

The story told by Barry Carlsworth before the assembled men of Rackabout Range was true in the main, but it was Frank Dymock in the guise of Masked Mark—the same he had worn that day when Adola Fee endeavored to avenge her murdered lover; the same when he had awaited the coming of Barry behind the *motte*, and hastily explaining all, placed him apparently out of the race by "creasing" his horse—for whom he was waiting.

Together they lent what aid they could to the fallen man who had stolen "their thunder," and before he died, Dike Roberts made full confession of the important secrets, even to what he suspected as to the murder of Oren Bohee. They knew that doubt would be cast upon their story unless they could have the confession repeated before other and disinterested parties. And it was in hopes that the wounded man would live long enough to reveal all at Stokeley's that led to their moving him so far, and to all that followed. He did live until at the point where they halted for the third time, as already noticed. There he died. And there it was decided that Frank Dymock should assume and play to the end the role assigned the now dead man. They believed that it was the only manner in which Alva Bohee could leave Stokeley's alive.

The reader has seen how admirably Dymock played his part. He was afraid to give Alva Bohee the secret signal for which he was so impatiently looking, lest the keen eyes which were watching his every movement should detect the imposture.

No sooner was he clear of the house with his supposed prisoner than Masked Mark revealed himself and removed the handcuffs, giving Bohee to understand what was in the wind and the part he was expected to play. Even as he explained, Barry Carlsworth came up with the horse Alva had ridden there, and crossing their front without pausing, Frank deftly changed his mount, leaving Alva Bohee to lay the trail that was fated to bring grief to Adola Fee and her parent.

Then the two men returned and carried Dike Roberts to Stokeley's, to throw Colonel Vanderlyn into a fever of rage, chagrin and doubt.

This was the strange and bewildering story told in proper turn by the three men who had so adroitly played their parts in the drama. And while they were so telling it, Demas Fee escaped from bondage and stole away, never again to place foot on Rackabout Range. The escape was never very closely investigated. There may have been those who fancied they could guess close to the truth, but if so, not even a questioning look was cast toward Barry Carlsworth. There were enough of the Crooks of Rackabout Range in limbo to cover them all with glory and renown when the story of that night was told.

What matter if a single man escaped?

The imprisonment, trial and conviction of the counterfeiters and stock thieves have been published to the reading world in all the newspapers of the land; no need to comment on the trial or result.

Adola Fee was severely wounded by the bullet of one of the men who mistook her for Masked Mark, besides being badly bruised by the fall from her horse as it dropped dead. But in due course of time she recovered, and as the murder of her lover had been fully avenged, she rose from her bed far more like her olden self than the half-insane being she had been until that eventful night. Only to her father and—long afterward—to her husband, did she explain why she had been abroad that night in such a guise. She believed in her semi-madness that she could

discover and capture Masked Mark. And when, in sudden terror, she fled from that stern challenge, she failed to recognize the voice of her parent.

Long after the Crooks of Rackabout Range were meted out the punishment they so richly merited, Barry Carlsworth received the reward he so nobly deserved. Adola loved him far better than she thought she could ever learn to love again; if not so fiery, so impulsive as had been her passion for Oren Bohee, it was still better; a calm, true, trusting love, such as makes the happiest of all homes.

And Alva Bohee, too, received some recompense for all that he had undergone, in the hand and heart of Jessie Roberts. For a long time the little wild girl bitterly mourned over her dead, and at least partially blamed Alva Bohee for it. For a long time she refused to see him or to leave her lonely home in the broken land; but then Adola Fee visited and won her from her solitary grief, and living with her and the broken-spirited old man, Jehudi Fee, Jessie gradually learned to take a more correct view of the sad affair, and to place the blame where it properly belonged; partly at the door of Colonel Victor Vanderlyn, partly—but no, not even in her own heart would the loyal daughter admit that Dike Roberts had done wrong.

"The Parson" still resides on the Range, but a veil is kept drawn over the past. Though both Barry Carlsworth and Frank Dymock preserve in a prominent place, one of the masks worn in those troubled days by "Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective," Alva is far too considerate to bring sad memories to his little red-haired angel of the household by doing the same.

And Jessie loves him none the less for it, be sure!

THE END.

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